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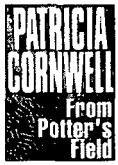

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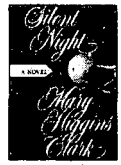

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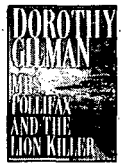

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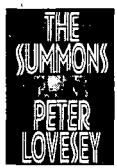

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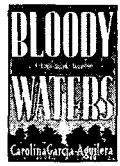

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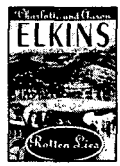

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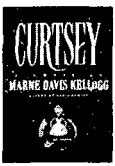

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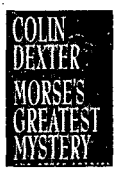

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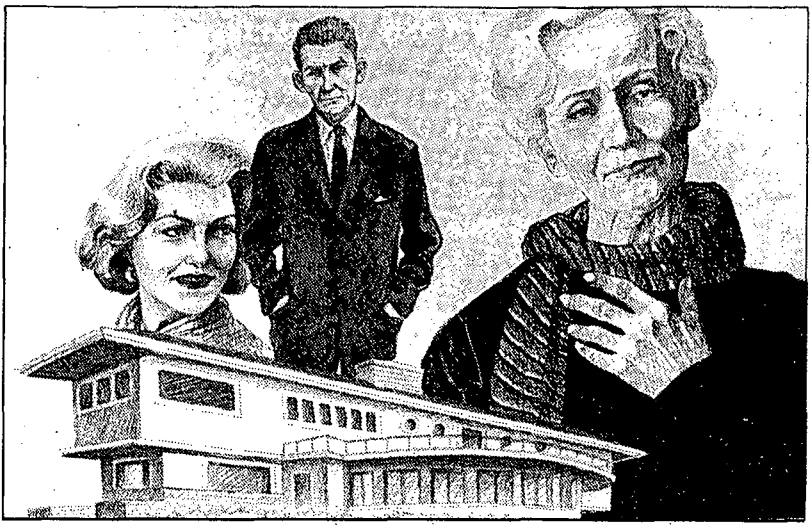

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THE THIEF OF NOTHING

by Jeffry Scott

After he'd got over his wife's death, more or less, Scipton started indulging himself for a change. Cautiously, with many a qualm. His adult life, career aside, had been devoted to caring for Pamela and their son, always with an eye to the future, which entailed doing things on the cheap or simply going without. She and the boy having left him, via death and emigration respectively, maybe it was time to pamper Number One.

Buying a weekend cottage seemed ideas-above-his-station pretentious—Scipton dreaded affectation, showing off—but he didn't smoke, hardly drank apart from the occasional pint of beer, ran a miserly though reliable car, was averse to costly pastimes such as golf or gambling. He could afford a second home.

Colleagues were amused when he chose a village only twenty miles from County Police HQ at Godleigh. He could have lived there full time and still driven to work in half an hour, Landshire

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being a notoriously under-populated region, short on traffic jams.

Scipton, a cadaverous man with features seemingly grabbed at random from a sculptor's spare-parts box and crowned by cropped, sandy hair resembling an upended scrubbing brush, took the amusement in his measured stride. Hagga's Hythe might as well have been twenty thousand miles from the cathedral city of Landfield, so he really did get away from it all there. A village by courtesy, more of a spread-out hamlet, the Hythe clung to one side of a tidal estuary, its hunched stone buildings reflected in water the colour of beer. At low tide a big sky gave beached-whale mudflats the bluish sheen of freshly landed fish.

"I am a crime writer by good inheritance," Jeffry Scott told *EQMM*. "My father, Gray Usher, wrote pulp thrillers in the '50s and a series of hard-back whodunits." Unlike his father, Mr. Scott concentrates on the short story rather than the novel, but father and son collaborated on two story collections in the '70s: *EQMM* once ran a story from each in the same issue. Gray Usher often used U.S. settings; Mr. Scott usually sticks to England, as in the following rural tale. ¶

In another century the Hythe had been a busy community. Now a ship chandlery built to service windjammers was converted into flats beside a mini-marina. Hobby sailors generated a measure of social life in summer, though the yachting set stuck to their cliques and a couple of wine bars, the one passable restaurant. Hagga's Hythe remained a fine place for a man seeking his own company. Scipton bought the last cottage before sea and reeds took over; nobody bothered him there.

Year-round residents knew his name and granted him the occasional grudging nod. Extroverts deigned to pass the time of day. Not Hythe-born, he'd always be "a foreigner," but at least the newcomer was not pushy, didn't know it all. . . .

Despite keeping to himself without being actively hostile, Scipton was on good terms with Mrs. Penbarth. She lived on a hilltop the far side of the estuary, in a 1930s "modern" house painted ice-

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cream white, all straight lines and steel-framed windows. Yachtsmen used the place, visible from miles out to sea, as a landmark.

An elderly widow, Veronica Penbarth was said, in the most polite version, to be eccentric. Most days she walked right around the head of the estuary to linger on the shingle bank before Scipton's cottage. He suspected that she trespassed on his front garden, not that there was one, for he let salty grass and scattered tufts of sea-pinks encroach as they pleased. The fence had collapsed in an autumn gale and he'd never troubled to renew it.

Mrs. Penbarth, tall and angular, had a habit of staring right through people, even, or perhaps especially, if they spoke to her. Her eyes were peculiar, still markedly blue yet filmed somehow, abstracted. She had the reputation of a hermit, a recluse. Sometimes Scipton pointed out mildly that the lady was neither, since she went out into the world. "Yes, but I've never heard of her having a visitor, certainly not from hereabouts," countered Clem Potter of the village stores and post office. "Rattling around that great mansion over there, no end of rooms for just the one old biddy—tisn't nachrul, and you can't convince me it is."

Sally Schuck, district nurse and romantic snob, said that Mrs. Penbarth was "a county type, top-drawer in the old days" but had married beneath her, "going peculiar from grief" in widowhood; subsequently Mrs. P had fallen out with such family as remained. Scipton judged that Hagga's Hythe, short of what are known as characters, cast Veronica Penbarth in that role. Doing so on wholly inadequate grounds.

It struck him, when he bothered to consider the matter, as rather silly, decidedly sad, and above all, typical of human nature.

One Saturday morning during his third year at the Hythe, Scipton strolled out of his front door, yawning and stretching mightily. And was taken aback, felt illogically intrusive and blundering, to find himself yawning in Mrs. Penbarth's face. Starting violently, he had exclaimed, "Sorry."

"Why, have you done something terrible?" she'd demanded, emitting a seagull's raucous skirl of laughter. In her white mac, pewter hair clinging to the narrow head so that Mrs. Penbarth's nose appeared larger and beaklike, she put him in mind of a gull.

"That's a joke," she added helpfully. "I learned it at school." Following up abruptly: "Blue Mountain!"

"Sorry?" Scipton had repeated.

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"Blue Mountain coffee, isn't it? Freshly ground, not some of Clem Potter's muck gone stale in a bag. Splendid aroma."

Now that's panhandling with style, he thought. And aloud, gravely, "I hate to drink alone, would you join me in a cup?" As her lips parted he said quickly, "One cup each, there isn't room for both of us in the same one, I know that joke."

"Spoilsport." Mrs. Penbarth entered the cottage without hesitation, openly and inoffensively curious. "I say, this is an adventure. Isn't it lucky that old hags don't need chaperones?" And that was Veronica, cut-glass voice a goblet of plummy vowels; a piquant mixture of dowager and twenties schoolgirl. She even used expressions like "ripping" and "topping," though Scipton sensed a whiff of self-parody when they emerged.

They were friends by the end of that summer, having spent a total of no more than an hour or so together. If Veronica felt like talking, she rapped at his door. Otherwise she paced the shingle quarterdeck for a while and took herself off, each party feigning not to have noticed the other.

Yes, Scipton admitted, Mrs. Penbarth was eccentric, though less so than she allowed folk to assume. If one didn't recognise a horde of quotations—anything from Gibbon to T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas to Bob Hope—seamlessly woven into conversation, then at times her discourse was baffling. Another trait, stony indifference to greetings, was not what it seemed. Scipton tested his theory by saying something to Veronica's back, without response. Her hearing was impaired; consciously or otherwise, she relied on lip-reading. . . .

Intuition told him that she was unhappy, experience suggested that Veronica had brought some of that on herself. She'd been a beauty in her day, conjuring up a ghost of that past with a tilt of the chin, certain expressions and stances. Beauties grow accustomed to power, chafing when time dethrones them. Her inbred arrogance might flower into unbridled bad temper. Their relationship was too casual and insubstantial to trigger it, but he read facial lines engraved by stormy emotion.

The friendship was in its second year when Veronica Penbarth created a precedent by inviting him to tea—after asking with a trademark blend of brusqueness and charm, "Are you a proper policeman?"

"It depends. I'm not corrupt, if that's what you mean. Never laid hands on a member of the public except in self-defense."

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"Touchy, touchy! Come off your high horse, there's a good boy. I meant nothing of the kind, you're obviously straight. But are you a *detective* or a traffic-mover-alonger?"

Doctors encountered this hazard, and motor mechanics, Scipton reflected grimly. She had some law-and-order bee in her bonnet and wanted him to chase it. No chance! "My rank," he stated flatly, "is Detective Inspector, but—" He was poised to explain about going through channels, with a postscript on coppers' very sensible unwillingness to be recruited by civilian friends in the cause of a private worry or grudge.

"Good-oh! Tea this afternoon then. Three-thirty sharp, mind. Cucumber sandwiches go soggy if left to wither on the vine. Time, tide, and sliced cucumbers wait for no man. Bye-ee." Mrs. Penbarth was already striding away. An energetic old party, of course. Yet this time he wondered whether she was running before he could examine her invitation—or turn it down.

Seen from the lane, her home had a Noah's Ark air. Scipton recognised the similarity to a picture in his *Illustrated Bible for Little Ones,* forgotten for decades and flashing back now. The flat roof had ship-style railings along what must be a sun deck, while circular windows here and there suggested a liner's stern section, broken off and beached on the high ground. Costly and probably impressive in its day, but Potter of the post office was wrong about Mrs. Penbarth living in a mansion. Once entered, the house revealed rooms spacious rather than numerous.

It was just as well that Scipton had changed his slopping-around-off-duty gear for trousers with intentional creases, crisp white shirt, Parachute Regiment tie, and a dark blazer. For Veronica was unusually elegant in a silk dress striped charcoal and burgundy, none the less smart for being an antique.

Pastel oblongs of Indian rugs islanded the living room's parquet floor. Walls were dominated by a score or more paintings, all by the same artist. "My sister's work," Mrs. Penbarth said. "She died in War Two, poor dear, the bombing. Never had a lesson. When it comes to art I'm ignorant as the beasts that perish, but people tell me they're quite good."

"I like them a lot," he said diffidently. "Not that I'm an expert—but when my son was going for his History of Art degree, his mother and I took evening classes, seemed a good idea." Scipton broke off, clearing his throat. He tried to avoid the past. "He lives

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in Florida now, owns a gallery. Tom would turn up his nose at these. . . . Neon sculptures and fishheads floating around in transparent cubes is his idea of excellence."

"You're proud of him, all the same," Veronica asserted wistfully.

Scipton nodded, glad when she excused herself to fetch the tea things. He didn't want to discuss Tom. Waiting, he let the house speak to him, much as he did at scenes of crime. Light, airy, feminine. Not quite neglected, but a venerable cobweb decorated an angle of the high ceiling and the pot plants needed watering. In another few years the place would be beyond her. . . . Yet he could imagine worse homes in which to be lonely, as he felt sure Veronica must be. Why else this invitation?

After the famous cucumber sandwiches and second cups of Earl Grey tea, he learned why he was there.

There'd been a loaded pause while she appeared to be fascinated by the pattern on her saucer. Then: "I suppose you run across plenty of weirdness in your profession," Veronica remarked. Less in a just-making-small-talk manner than she imagined. . . .

Ghouls are the bane of sensitive coppers. Scipton had never forgotten the dentist who trapped him in the chair after a filling and wheedled, "That chap you arrested last week—it's all *sub judice,* of course, but I never breach confidences. What was he doing to those kids he abducted?" If Mrs. Penbarth craved similar goodies, he'd be disappointed in her yet not hugely surprised.

"I don't talk about the job." Polite but firm.

"Have you any experience of, well, senseless burglaries?" Veronica persisted. "Where somebody gets in but takes nothing?" Long hands, horsewoman's hands, became tightly dovetailed fingers in her lap. Untangled, they would tremble.

"Vandalism?" Scipton asked, trying to decode her question. "Children break into a school sometimes, their own or a rival gang's, and wreck it. Teenage parties can be gate-crashed, a bit of mayhem when parents are out of the way."

"No good—that sort of thing makes sense. Feuds, spite, and most youngsters have a bent for destruction," she responded matter-of-factly. "How about a burglar who steals nothing. And does it over and over again?"

"You'd better explain," he said resignedly.

Instead, Veronica replied, "I delivered aircraft to the RAF in the forties, ferrying from factories and repair depots. They ridiculed us at first." Sketching a phantom moustache, she mimicked,

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" 'Girls handling kites, old boy, whatever next?' But by '45 I was flying four-engine stuff, Lancasters and Stirlings, socking great bombers. I was . . . effective. Brave, as a matter of fact."

He had never heard Mrs. Penbarth brag. She wasn't boasting now, merely trying to establish credentials. "What's on my mind is melodramatic; you'll think I'm soft in the head. Plenty of people do anyway, like those fools down at the Hythe. Billy, my husband, we used to potter with a sailing dinghy, kept it in old man Budmore's garden—he had the cottage before your time. Then Billy got his directorship, we lived overseas a lot. New York for a while, the company penthouse, my dear! So many places, memories . . . but I'm closer to him where we sailed than anywhere else. Lord, that dinghy summer! We never had a song, but we'd be somewhere grand and stuffy, Lord Mayor's banquet or whatever, and he would whisper, 'Not a patch on the dinghy summer, Vee.' That was the time of our lives."

Veronica checked abruptly, staring at Scipton with filmy severity. "Rambling, I'm rambling. But I'm definitely not crackers, batty, cuckoo."

"We'll take that as a given," he assured her.

"Huh! Where was I? Melodrama . . . I keep harking back to rubbishy thrillers where the villain sets out to convince the heroine—generally a twit of the first water, crying out for persecution—that she is going off her head. Absurd, but what other reason can there be? If I thought it was sheer malice, nastiness for its own sake, I *would* be scared."

Twenty minutes had passed, and Scipton could understand Mrs. Penbarth's nerviness. The well-nigh imperceptible scale of the invasion was what made it . . . sinister wasn't one of his words, but worrisome would do nicely.

"Let's see if I've got this straight. Over the past few months somebody keeps sneaking in here, you're sure of that. He or she never takes anything nor does any damage. Forgive me, but in that case, how can you tell that—"

"You haven't listened. These windows hinge outwards at the top, there's a strut you stick on a little metal peg. Set it on the second hole, and the result is ventilation without the curtains blowing enough to snag those cacti on the windowsill. Every so often I come back and a window is on the *third* hole, with a cactus swathed in netting. That doesn't happen by itself.

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"And my specs—I make out the shopping list every Wednesday morning, leave my reading glasses in their case on the arm of the chair, the arm away from the fireplace. Otherwise if I jog the blessed thing it falls under the chair and I have to go on my prayerbones to fish it out. Twice I've come back from shopping and my specs are sitting on the wrong arm." She gestured helplessly. "Teeny-tiny signs."

Every Wednesday. "You have a routine and stick to it, always go shopping the same day?"

Veronica blinked irritably. "I suppose so. The nearest decent deli is at Taunton, ditto the supermarket, and my bridge club meets the far side of Taunton every Wednesday afternoon. Saves petrol to do the lot in one fell swoop. But it's not just Wednesdays, I thought of that. Sometimes it happens when I'm out having my hair done or getting the car serviced. It's as if they move in whenever I leave the house for more than an hour. . . ."

"D'you mind showing me round the rest of the house?"

"I'm not an estate agent—show yourself round, go where you please. Sing out if you get lost." Unburdening herself had improved the lady's spirits. He wasn't offended. Veronica's offhandedness was a form of affection.

Scipton's tour did not take long. The dining room was tidy though dusty. The message was that Mrs. Penbarth stuck to the minimum of rooms, saving housework. In the kitchen, the enamel of a fridge, top of the line in its day, had faded from surgical white to dingy cream. It hummed irritatingly until he pushed the door, forcing it into the flaccid rubber seal until the handle clicked.

Beyond the kitchen was a utility room: washing machine, spin-drier, freezer cabinet, and, oddly, three electric irons, two of them newish, ranked above the fold-down ironing board. Scipton smiled to himself: All homes have cryptic elements making perfect sense to the families concerned. Maybe Veronica could not resist a bargain; his wife had been addicted to five-pence-off-this-week-only, leading to strange souvenirs. They'd returned from a Lake District holiday with countless cartons of cereal and washing powder.

There were four bedrooms upstairs, a lavatory, and a bathroom. Veronica's room was austere, a framed photograph of her dear husband its sole ornament. He didn't poke around in there, the guest sleeping quarters, bare mattresses rolled back o beds.

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Scipton found a screwdriver in a kitchen drawer and much of the hour spent investigating the premises was devoted to using it.

"What on earth have you been up to, I thought you *were* lost," she grumbled.

"Stripping the front and back door locks—not to worry, they're back in place and none the worse for it. No scratch marks on the works, I doubt if picklocks have been used on them."

"Crumbs, you are thorough."

"Got to be, if you aren't a genius. You say you never forget to lock up when going out. Which brings us to who else has a key. Your cleaning lady, for instance?"

He had flicked a raw spot. "I do my own work, d'you think I'm senile? Women used to come up from the village, but by the time one improved their half-hearted efforts it was faster to do the whole thing in the first place. I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself. Does the place look squalid? Does it?"

"Calm down, I only asked."

Mollified, Veronica conceded, "I hire a firm to blitz the place every four months. Nice girls from Bridgwater, they zoom over on a motor-scooter and attend to the heavy work. My hinges are rusty, I can't bend very well."

"Do those cleaners have a key?"

"Of course not. They come by appointment so it doesn't arise. Forget about keys."

"I know only one way to work," he pleaded good-humouredly. Wary after her sharpness, he proceeded carefully. "Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying somebody close to you, friend or family, sneaks in and plays tricks. But somebody could be misusing an authorised person's keys."

"Out of the question. Get it through your head, my keys stay in my handbag. There is a spare set, in case I mislay mine, but they are hidden away safely—and yes, they are still where I put them."

Tucked beneath her undies in a dressing-table drawer, he'd bet a pound to a penny. Certainly some cache any experienced burglar could uncover in minutes. But first that burglar (or housebreaker, depending on the time of day) had to gain entry. For which, physical evidence suggested, he needed a key. It appeared to be a chicken-and-egg riddle.

"You've never loaned keys to a friend or neighbour, when you've gone on holiday, for instance, and needed plants watered? Or left your purse on the bus and had it handed back later—"

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"I don't use public transport and haven't taken holidays since Billy died. There is no possibility of anyone getting hold of my keys."

"What about your daughter? You mentioned something once about her coming back from America. I got the impression she was living in the district."

Mrs. Penbarth bristled anew. "So? I don't communicate with Helen, sent her packing before this nonsense began." She sucked a phantom lemon slice. "She's an adult—responsible adult would be stretching it, after two divorces and God knows how many affairs. *My* responsibility for her is long over. We don't see eye to eye, as you must have gathered by now. I've written her off. She is the last person I'd give a key."

Parchment cheeks reddened once more. "If she wants to behave like a parlourmaid, that's her business—I will not have my house serving her sordid purposes. Oh, she asked for her own key when we were still on reasonably good terms. Knowing my daughter, I knew why she wanted to come and go as she pleased. Not a chance!"

Scipton glanced away while his hostess regained composure.

Veronica Penbarth sighed tiredly. "God, how mortifying, washing dirty linen in public at my age. Who's the parlourmaid now, hey?"

"Forgotten already, didn't hear a word." Scipton wandered over to the window. Such a big garden . . . "Who looks after all that?"

"A couple from that new estate at the foot of the hill. They retired early and are glad to earn money on the side. The ride-on mower and the rest of the tools are kept in the garage—it has power points, they bring an electric kettle for their mid-morning tea, so before you start the same old song, they don't need a key to the house."

"Entry isn't forced and you have the only keys; it's a puzzler."

"I'm not imagining this, you know. Another proof occurred to me just now. The little bureau in the corner, push the drawer all the way in and it jams. So I take care not to push it all the way. Last week I needed to check some old bills, and had the devil of a job to open the drawer. Guess why . . . ?"

Addressing her reflection on the windowpane, Scipton said slowly, "I'm sure you are not imagining it. Frankly, it beats me."

"Unless they want to brainwash me into accepting that I have delusions." Veronica shook her head. "Not outside some trumper-

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thriller, wicked family solicitor scheming to have me declared unfit to run my own affairs, so he can embezzle my money. There isn't enough to justify the effort, Billy was a darling but couldn't he make money fly! I live on an annuity and the state pension. This house will fetch a packet when I hop the twig, but it's all left to Royal Air Force charities. I haven't made a secret of it."

She cocked that birdlike head. "Helen gets nothing, but I didn't exclude her from spite. Billy believed in making one's own way—he certainly did, he dropped his aitches and looked wrong in a dinner jacket, even when he was top of the tree, chairman of the board, with foreign governments glad of his advice.

"Billy believed children deserve the best you can afford in the way of education, health care, and so forth. Love as well, goes without saying. But after university they're on their own, materially."

Scipton grunted agreement with the late William Penbarth. He had encountered children of the rich who had wasted their lives waiting for dead men's shoes. . . .

"It's a puzzler," he repeated meditatively. "Mind if I stroll round the garden?"

She shrugged pettishly. "Never settle, flea on a griddle. Bad form in a guest. Very well, if you must. I shall do the washing-up."

The garage was locked, but peering through a crack in double doors, he established that Veronica drove a compact car, a Rover Metro.

The back garden fell away in grassy billows rather than terraces, ending in a sparse belt of trees. Her gardening couple would need that ride-on mower. The drive ran from the lane, on past the house, making its roller-coaster way alongside a beech hedge until ending at a distant belt of young trees. A uselessly lengthy drive; he supposed that grass wouldn't thrive in the hedge's shade, and sooner than let the lawn fray away into patches of mud and moss, starved ground had been covered in a strip of gravel.

The drive had not been raked in a while. Colonising weeds were poking their heads above the pebbles. Scipton squatted on his heels, joints cracking. Either a vehicle with tires two feet wide had driven down to the tree-line boundary, or a smaller vehicle had worn furrows during repeated journeys. Mrs. Penbarth being unlikely to encourage trucks, the grooves were probably those of a van or mini-bus. The wheelbase was too broad for Veronica's Metro: This might be the burglar's spoor.

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Returning to the patio, where Veronica waited, he asked, "Had anything sizable delivered lately, needing a van or a pickup truck? It looks as if one went to the bottom of the garden within the past few weeks. Bringing that big mower, maybe?"

"Nothing like that. My piano came on a huge lorry, but that was . . . goodness, the year Princess Anne married, *that* long ago. The first wedding, to that chinless wimp."

"Doesn't matter, just wondered," he sighed.

Mrs. Penbarth hugged herself as a wind sprang up. "You can't help me."

"Not officially, unless or until you make a formal complaint." Veronica would get no joy from the traditional village bobby. There was no such animal; she'd have to visit the area station at Coughleigh where, providing she called while the branch was manned, a young constable would be on tap. He'd be dismissive. Scipton wasn't geriatric—just yet, he added inwardly—and already certain younger colleagues treated him differently. Which was to say indifferently. Veronica, nearer eighty than seventy, risked being regarded as a nuisance. Even if unaware of her reputation around Hagga's Hythe, the officer was tasked with looking after three other villages as well. The Moving Spectacles Affair, involving nil theft or damage, would gravitate to his Round File, aka the wastebasket.

"Look, I have a spot of leave coming up, I can nose around." Reading her face, Scipton grinned reassuringly. "It's not fobbing you off, I shall do my best and you can't ask for more."

"I suppose so. Golly, how ungracious. Thank you, if only for listening."

"Keep this to yourself, we don't want to scare anyone off by saying a copper's stuck his nose in. Keep to your routine, Taunton on Wednesdays, going to the hairdresser and so forth." Taking another look at the garden, he indicated livid roof tiles glimpsed through foliage. "Is that the new estate where your gardeners live?"

Veronica scowled at the distant dwelling. "No, you can't see the estate from here. That's Percy Blood's eyesore. Frightful little tick, he talked the farmer into selling him a derelict barn, bribed a few councillors and the planning officer for permission to build a bungalow in its place."

Scipton's lips twitched at the corners. "That's slander."

"Huh! That's the truth. I have had to spend a fortune on spruce

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trees to hide the worst of the monstrosity. Plastic shutters, fake Spanish ironwork, purple roof, it's a nightmare."

"Sounds Blood's taste, the man's got no class."

"You know him then."

Every copper in the county knew or at least knew of "Innocent" — nickname earned by incessant use of the word. According to Innocent, he was accident-prone when it came to handling stolen goods; frequent victim of good nature and a legion of false friends, crooked employees. Thus far Godleigh's magistrates and even a judge at Quarter Sessions had accepted such pleas. For Percy Blood had a good lawyer as well as an ingratiating manner.

"I'm surprised *you* know him," Scipton said.

"Not by choice. He came smarming round when I opposed his building application. Spun a yarn about dear old Dad wanting to live on the farm where he was born, so Junior had bought a plot of land to make his dream come true. I fell for it, chump that I am. The place was nearly finished before I learned better."

Innocent Blood's father was a veteran drunk given to disrobing on Landfield's cathedral green in balmy weather and after sufficient cider. On a notable occasion he had streaked in front of a coachload of church architecture buffs, cameras primed. Smiling thinly, Veronica declared, "Cheats never prosper. I'm sure Blood counted on exiling the old rip to that bungalow, but Papa told him to take a running jump, won't go near the place. All that bribery wasted, and a damned good job too. Blood tries to let it out in summer but it's too isolated. I'm heartbroken for him, ha ha."

She had grown quite animated. Nothing like the downfall of others to cheer one up. Human nature again, Scipton reflected. There was a lot of it about.

"What do you call a burglar who steals nothing?" Detective Inspector Scipton's query was rhetorical, aimed at himself.

"Intruder on premises," Detective Sergeant Virgo parried promptly. Scipton was in the CID section's main office, woolgathering while Virgo put finishing touches to a complex dossier on car theft.

"A nonintrusive intruder," Scipton mused, "contradiction in terms. . . . Supposing aforesaid intruder keeps gaining entry but never steals. What's in it for him? Unless it's a her."

"Sweet nuffink," Ron Virgo asserted. A recent transfer from the Met Police, he had a beer-barrel body and the complexion of steak,

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extra-rare. "Unless it's the buzz—plenty of hounds love being where they have no right to be. Tosh McVittie, bank specialist; Tosh reckoned when he zapped a vault, he came. You know, ejaculated, climaxed."

"I get the idea, thanks." For all his experience, Scipton was something of a prude. Sex angle? He didn't believe a word of it.

"This a live case, Guv, or a touch of the hypotheticals?"

"Blessed if I know." Scipton recalled the closing minutes of his teatime visit to Mrs. Penbarth.

The largest of her sister's paintings hung above the grand piano in the hall. Following his gaze, Veronica had said, "That's one of poor Dilys's. My sister, she was killed in the Blitz." Going on to paraphrase information issued perhaps ninety minutes earlier: no artistic training, possible value of the works, her own lack of appreciation. She was serenely confident of it being news to him.

Well, old people often repeat themselves. Stuck-needle Syndrome. But he found it hard to regard Veronica as that sort of old person. She had merely lived longer than many. On the other hand, if she could not keep track of recently delivered data, was she any more reliable concerning the opening of windows, placement of her spectacles case?

Challenged, Sergeant Virgo nibbled his thumbnail, spitting a fragment aside before suggesting: "Chummy might *use* stuff instead of nicking it. Underwear freak, maybe he dresses up in female gear out of a wardrobe, puts it back neat and tidy."

Reading his superior's expression, Virgo set out to prove that his mind was not one-track. "Okay, try this. A con man needs a front for the sting to work. Like an office in a merchant bank, vacant for lunch hour. Only this is a house. Same difference, a place giving him the right image. Am I getting warm?"

Meeting silence, Virgo hoisted his paws in surrender. "You stumped me. What's the answer, Guv?"

Shortly afterwards, Detective Sergeant Virgo confided to Detective Constable Daisy Webb that behind an austere exterior the Skipper was a real wind-up merchant. For requested to explain his catch question, the Inspector had looked surprised. "Answer, Ron? I haven't the faintest notion."

Veronica Penbarth's stranded liner was the last of four houses in Lookout Lane, which dead-ended at a stile. At the start of his leave period, Scipton scouted the area. One of Veronica's neigh-

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bours had a lovingly restored baby MG in the carport. He didn't bother to remember its number; the vehicle was distinctive. Another resident drove a company car, a Ford; he noted that registration number. The remaining place was for sale and appeared to have been empty for weeks.

Stage One finished, Scipton retreated to his cottage and pottered for several days. On Wednesday morning he cut sandwiches and filled a vacuum flask with tea. He had borrowed a flashy Scorpio for the week. Parking in a lay-by near the entrance to Lookout Lane, he arranged his best jacket on a wire hanger so that it showed through the Scorpio's rear windows.

Travelling salesman's cover established by that flag, he settled in the front seat with a ledger. Passersby would take him for a modern pedlar planning strategy. Nobody was likely to notice him, or speculate if they did, but if a job's worth doing. . . .

Scipton discovered that willpower was required to stay awake. Elderberry trees clotted with white blossom, their very odour sleepy, shaded the lay-by. Down at Hagga's Hythe, people still brewed elderflower wine. . . . Having tried it, he felt that Hythers were welcome to the stuff.

Veronica Penbarth sailed past at 11:30 A.M., Taunton bound. Her arrival could have been predicted with his eyes shut, from the Metro's sound: Newer-generation drivers didn't bother shifting down through the gears to slow on a hill, they punished their brake linings.

There was a lull until 12:05 P.M. when a boy on a trail-bike with Learner plates wobbled down the lane and set off towards Godleigh. Knowing the majority of residents' cars, Scipton was still waiting for outsiders.

A shiny station wagon went up Lookout Lane at 12:09 P.M. The driver was talking hard, from goldfish motions of his mouth. An edgy young man and woman sat on the edge of the backseat. The group returned within twenty minutes.

Scipton was deducing that an estate agent had failed to sell the empty house, when a blare of horn and screech of tires alerted him. Rocking on its suspension, the estate car had stopped dead in the main road. A Suzuki two-seater, top down, had crossed its bows to scoot into the lane. Fire-engine-red paintwork set off blond plumes fluttering on the driver's head. The Suzuki suggested a feisty terrier chasing a cat up an alley.

"Naughty," he mumbled. Sooner than wait five seconds to give

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the station wagon right of way, Blondie had taken a calculated risk, scooting in front. She would be back in a minute, defeated by the cul-de-sac.

Time unfolded, birds conducted enjoyable shouting matches, fragments of dead elder-blossom whispered down to give the Scorpio dandruff. At 2 P.M. he locked the car and marched up to Veronica's house in his shirtsleeves. No little red Suzuki was parked in the lane or beside the other houses. There was no sign of it in front of Mrs. Penbarth's house.

It had to be tucked away then, probably well down the drive. Hence those furrows he'd spotted. Sheepish at having to tiptoe on the gravel, Scipton was heading for the back garden when he saw that a ground-floor window was open: not one of Veronica's on-the-second-hole ones, but an entire leaf pushed out so that it overhung the drive.

Stepping onto a flower border, he looked over the sill and caught the burglar, although not red-handed. For the burglar wore housework gloves the colour of butter or travel-poster sunshine, not to mention an apron emblazoned BITCHIN' CHEF, and too much eye shadow. The burglar glanced up, saw him, and screamed.

"Steady," Scipton exclaimed. For his own benefit, principally, since the shriek had startled him. And more coherently, "It's all right, I am a police officer." He fumbled with the warrant card, getting its fiddly case open on the second attempt.

At a mutual loss, they exchanged stares. Poor at guessing ages, Scipton settled for not-a-kid. "You scared me out of seven years' growth," she accused. An American accent blurred edges of the English original. He'd never heard that voice but he had seen her before.

And one would not forget meeting her. She was, er . . . striking. Long face, wide-set eyes, white teeth seldom quite covered by the upper lip. Taken together they gave her a delicious air of permanent startlement. Caricatured, she would resemble one of those old-fashioned wooden horses on carousels, all teeth and manic gaze. . . .

He stepped back on a geranium as the mental cartoon triggered recognition. Her face was a subversive variation on Veronica Penbarth's patrician features. This was Veronica at half or less Veronica's present age, sparkier, more — ahem! — vibrant. (All right, sexy.)

"You're, um, the daughter." That sounded rudely dismissive,

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and he scowled under the effort of memory-retrieval. *"Helen.* Sorry, I don't know your last name."

The burglar relaxed a notch, peeling off the gloves and doffing the apron to reveal the shortest dress he'd seen on a real person, as distinct from girlie calendars. "Helen Penbarth Carter Wainright Voss, take your pick, sometimes I lose track." Gold charm bracelet tinkling, she extended an arm over the windowsill to clasp his hand. "Pleased to meet you—I think."

"Every four years or so Mummy severs diplomatic relations and casts me into outer darkness. It's a cycle, like a very extended PMS thing."

Sitting beside her on the back doorstep, Scipton pretended not to hear the last part. He was unaccustomed to talk of what in his working-class childhood had been the no-go area of Female Troubles. He was no more used to a highly attractive stranger treating him as a familiar companion.

The doorstep perch was a compromise after a contretemps: Helen had invited him in and Scipton had refused. The owner was away and, daughter or no, Helen had no authority to allow entry. He was unsure of the legal position, but morally she was in the wrong.

A bumblebee jinked away when Helen jetted cigarette smoke in its path. "Mummy has already profiled me as a harlot and ingrate, I'm sure. The sea's always 'wine dark' in Homer, and to my mother I am always the nympho with two divorces." She laughed abruptly. "Three, any day now, that'll please her. For the record, all my husbands were unfaithful to me, *I* never cheat."

Helen hugged her knees, disclosing yet further thigh. Scipton concentrated on a stand of lupins directly in front of him. "I don't need to know any of this."

"Well excu-u-use me."

"My concern is what you are up to here. Fair enough, your mother can't be the easiest person to get along with. We all get old, though, and some of us get cranky. She is your mum, the only one you'll ever have." Annoyed at delivering cliches, he took it out on Helen. "It's downright nasty, tormenting her this way."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know. Sneaking in and leaving just enough traces to prove somebody has been here."

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She edged away, brows drawing down, and for a split second it was her mother glaring at him. "It's not like that!"

"Not much it isn't." He rose, tired of sparring. "You are tormenting the life out of her."

Helen stood up too, nose-to-nose, or rather bosom to shirtfront. "That's a crock. She may be a monster but I love her dearly. Sometimes I'd gladly strangle her, but . . . When I found Herr Doktor Voss in bed, *our* bed, with his nurse, I ran home to Mummy.

"I'm a lousy daughter, Veronica's no great shakes as a supportive ma, but I needed her. It was fine for all of a month. I stayed at a motel down the road, just a place to leave my luggage, and saw Mummy nearly every day." She flicked the cigarette away. "After a while, it was clear she needs me more than I do her. After being away so long, the change was obvious."

Helen seemed reluctant to continue. "It's none of your business, but she has gotten . . . uh . . . sort of erratic."

"Forgetful," he suggested, relieved at getting on track at last. "Repeats herself. You have to be patient with her, that's all."

Veronica's daughter studied him thoughtfully before replying. "Forgetful is where did I leave that book and did I really arrange to play tennis with you yesterday? With Mummy it's more like badly edited videotape. Little snips of consciousness—pow, gone." Scarlet nails flashed as Helen snapped her fingers.

"She took me to Landfield one time, we parked, and she walked away leaving the motor running. She didn't forget: The past five seconds had been abolished. Like blacking-out with her eyes open. The scary part is she didn't accept what had happened. Said the ignition must be shorting, she would never leave the motor running.

"Know how it is when somebody, and this is my own mother, is so goddam definite that black is white, up is down? You get to doubt yourself, so I let it slide." Unless she was a superb actress, Helen was close to tears. "Other stuff surfaced, the longer I spent with her. She keeps leaving the fridge open, you have to slam it, things spoil but she doesn't notice. Food poisoning waiting to happen. You can't tell her, though. I tried throwing stuff out when she wasn't looking, and she gave me a hard time about American ways, wasting good food.

"One evening I called by and there was this lovely smell of woodsmoke. From the utility room; she'd just walked away while doing her ironing, hours before. Those irons are supposed to be

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fail-safe but nobody told this one, it burnt through the cover and the padding and was charring the wood. I went hyper, lectured her about fire hazards. Mummy didn't turn a hair—she would not have been that careless, I must have done it myself and was blaming her."

Three electric irons for a one-person household, Scipton remembered. Veronica had forgotten her chores more than once, not bothering to throw ruined irons away.

"There's more. Mummy's an insomniac. Keeps a zillion sleeping pills in the bedside cabinet. I picture her taking one, having a glitch, taking another. . . . But she flat-out refuses to see a specialist. Where do I get off, if anyone needs a shrink it's me. I tried to move in with her, and she exploded. Kicked me out." Her voice faltered. "We've had our moments, but I have never, never seen her so angry. I mean I *fled;* she was ready to deck me.

"If she knew about going into the Fourth Dimension every so often, there wouldn't be a problem. She honestly believes I'm mistaken and she is fine. What can I tell you—mothers and daughters. . . . Even if I could drag her to Harley Street's finest, I don't want her in . . . one of those places, an institution. Not even a top-of-the-line one, and I can afford that for her. You see, ninety-five percent of the time she is sharper than me. But the other five percent could land her in terrible trouble. And she banished me just when I needed to stay up to speed on how she was doing."

Light dawned for Scipton. "It's a bloomin' surveillance operation! You've been sneaking in to check on her."

"What else can I do? After the grand opera bit, never darken my door again, I snagged the house keys out of her purse. Had them copied at a while-you-wait place and slipped them back the same day. Veronica didn't catch me. She doesn't lock the front door when she is home, and she's deaf as a post—it wasn't difficult."

Sarcasm is the last resort of the exasperated. "You've been helping your mother a treat, her nerves are in tatters." Scipton moderated his tone. "She knows you have been in there, well, not you, but somebody. What effect do you think that is having?"

"I'm always super careful," Helen protested. "All I do is count her sleeping pills and check the utility room. Clean up a little, open a few windows and let air in. That's another thing, she thinks she is on top of housework but I have to do it right."

"The only way to replace everything exactly the way you found

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it is to take Polaroid photographs before you start," he said abstractedly. "Special Branch do that. . . ."

He was thinking hard. "This is a domestic dispute, no need for me to take action, but I must insist on having those keys you copied."

Helen stared, and it was Scipton who looked away. "You're painting me into a corner. If I can't keep an eye on her, I shall hire a lawyer and apply to have her ruled unfit to run her own life. It'll kill me, but I can't let her harm herself. What will that do to Mummy?"

She was right, damn her. But the current farce could not go on. Helen's concept of doing good by stealth was having exactly the opposite effect. All the same, the way she was looking at him . . . That must be how he looked at scummier offenders, Scipton realised. No wonder they writhed under hostility-laced disgust.

There must be a solution, a middle way. "It needn't come to legal battling and scandal. Maybe I can get the two of you back together."

"In your dreams. Mummy is not about to go for a peace treaty. I *know* her, she has this kind of skewed pride in sticking to decisions, right or wrong." Helen shrugged and turned away from him. "You can try—and you'll fail, believe me."

On the last evening of his leave Scipton had dinner with Helen Penbarth Carter Wainright Voss, at her insistence.

"I moved in with Mummy yesterday. How did you work that?" Scipton fiddled with the cutlery, shy of her. Helen's type had never appealed to him, not that he held with types, everybody was different. He wasn't the least attracted, let alone bedazzled. *Hold that thought, save you making a fool of yourself,* he resolved.

"Come on, making Mummy change her mind is some kind of miracle. Talk to me."

Her voice was rising, the restaurant was small, soon they would have an audience. Amoral, willful, and loud, what was there to like about this dreadful woman?

He said: "I guaranteed to stop all the funny business—no more self-opening windows and suchlike. Told her to think of it as poltergeist activity, a short-lived phenomenon . . . not that she swallowed that. In return, favor for favor, I persuaded her to think again about you."

Scipton hesitated, unaware that his shoulders had hunched

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defensively. "You won't like this: I explained that your concern about her welfare was a smokescreen. You're desperately lonely and insecure, you wanted a safe haven. Doubting Veronica's fitness to live on her own was a very unkind and thoughtless ploy to share the house with her."

"Thank you, Dr. Freud." Helen took a deep breath. "What the hey, so long as I can keep her out of trouble. Mummy thinks I'm an amateur hooker anyway, so why not manipulative bitch as well." She patted his arm. "You're all right."

"I've always believed so." He willed her to drop the matter now. He had told the truth after a fashion. The clincher had been to lose his temper with Veronica—stubborn didn't do her justice—arguing that she was lucky to have a child, however wayward and unsatisfactory, who cared.

Not like Tom, who grew up treating his parents with resentment and contempt. Clever, heartless Tom, breezing through his exams and snubbing Mum and Dad on graduation day. The finishing stroke had been Pamela's death. Tom phoned in the middle of the night, begging Scipton to wire money for the plane ticket: There was a cash-flow problem at the gallery.

Tom never arrived. What did was a postcard from a West Indies resort, carrying the two-word taunt, *"Thanks, sucker."* No signature needed. The one mystery Scipton could hardly contemplate, far less solve: why love and self-sacrifice had proved bitter as gall to the recipient . . .

Veronica had realised that such a story was too cruel to be invented. Scipton wouldn't have told anyone else, even to win a reconciliation. Mrs. Penbarth was an aristo, however, incapable of insulting a friend by showing pity for him.

Helen said, "You needn't eat smoked salmon if you hate it that much."

Returning to the present, he contrived to overturn his wineglass. "The first date is always the worst," Helen consoled him, and he nearly groaned aloud.

Over coffee, she teased, "You don't look like a cop. I find ugly men strangely attractive, but you'd never make it on TV. Not as a cop. A detective? Nah."

Scipton was rusty at this stuff, and in any case the wretched woman ought not to be encouraged. But staying silent would be boorish. Damn her, always putting him on the wrong foot. "Nobody looks as they are expected to, that would be too easy."

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"Nuns do. And teachers, a lot of teachers. Herr Doktor Voss looks exactly like a cosmetic surgeon who can't keep his pants zipped."

"You can only tell nuns by their uniform." He was getting the hang of conversation with Helen. Amazing, new tricks learned by an old dog.

"You blew it, detecting me," Helen challenged. "Caught me, but you had my motive all wrong. And you got on to me for the wrong reasons."

Despite the smile, he was stung. "All right, when did you sell your previous car and buy that Japanese roller skate? I know you switched cars recently. I found the original tire tracks, looked like a mini-bus. And you always took it to the end of the drive, well out of sight behind the house, and walked back."

"Science fiction, Skippy." He wished she wouldn't call him that. "I rented Suzie Suzuki at Heathrow the morning I landed and we've been podners ever since. Why change such a cute car?" Helen chuckled helplessly. "So much for the trained observer! The day we met, Suzie was parked out back where I always leave her, not way down that field."

"Dunce's cap for me. I could have sworn . . . The tracks looked so recent. . . ."

Responding to chagrin and an honest admission of defeat, she conceded, "You were right about the truck. I've seen it around Mummy's place. Landscape gardeners—pruning the spruce trees I guess. You were entitled to guess their tire marks were mine."

He felt covertly pleased that she was anxious to make up for the mockery. "Gardeners. That'd be the husband and wife your mother told me about. Yes, it had to be their van."

She shook her head. "Husband and wife? This was a landscaping crew, guys in coveralls and hard hats. Baseball caps, could be —anyway, they looked heavy-duty workers, with the big truck and all. I backed out in a hurry, in case they said anything to Mummy about me being there."

He was silent for a full half-minute. Veronica stuck to a timetable. Veronica was deaf as a post and didn't see so well these days. Veronica had an absentee neighbour whose home was such an eyesore that she blanked it out with a belt of fast-growing spruce trees. The neighbour had sunk capital in what, for much of each year, was an empty house, yet was in no hurry to sell the white elephant.

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"You can do anything except sulk, Skippy." Helen was poised between reproach and pique.

"Sulking be damned, I'm pleased as a dog with two tails."

"Great, I never have affairs with sulkers."

Inhaled coffee stung the back of Scipton's nose. "Blimey, you don't mess about."

She treated him to a Mona Lisa smile while he wiped his chin and his tie. He returned to the attack. "You must be off your head, I'm old and set in my ways. Call me sexist, but don't I get a say in all this?"

"Waiter," Helen warned, flicking her eyes at a minion swooping in with the bill. Leaning close, she whispered, "Guess we'll find out on the next date."

"Guv, it was as much fun as I ever get with my clothes on." Sergeant Virgo's piggy eyes shone. Scipton considered "Guv" only slightly more tolerable than "Skippy" but let it pass. A fawningly grateful Virgo was marginally preferable to the customary, know-all model.

"First we had the pack of 'em on candid camera. Daisy Webb shinned up a tree with the long lens, what a pickcher, what a photograph," Virgo chanted. "Picture? She shot a flaming sequence. Innocent Blood outside his drum with a clipboard, if you please, checking off VCRs and tellies stolen from the docks last week. Innocent telling them to watch out for those Christmas trees, don't break any branches. And a corker of him paying the team in readies.

"They had it down to a fine art. No wonder; practice makes perfect and it's been going on for months, from the amount of dodgy merchandise at his country seat. Truck to the end of the old girl's drive, lift a prepared section out of his boundary fence, and pass the gear through the trees to Blood's garden, human chain. Reg'lar worker ants—those tellies must go forty or fifty pounds apiece, and VCRs weigh a bit, but they off-loaded three hundred units in under an hour."

Virgo rubbed his hands. "Then they flaked out on the lawn, a good job jobbed, 'Cor, my aching back,' and Innocent starts passing out cold beers. Me and the lads crep' up on them. 'Bit long in the tooth for a Teddy Bears' Picnic, aren't we?' I go. You should have seen his face."

"Pale green and very long, I expect. The best that his smart

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brief can advise Mr. B is to get his affairs in order. He is going away."

"I left Daisy and DC Swain doing inventory on the bungalow, Guv. Stuffed to the rafters, Aladdin's Cave. Appreciate it, you letting me have the tickle. Do the old track record a power of good, know what I mean?"

"Teamwork," Scipton said airily. "I'm not greedy."

A disingenuous statement, for his reward had arrived before pointing Sergeant Virgo at Mr. Blood's secluded residence.

Veronica had insisted on giving Scipton one of her sister's paintings. Brushing aside No-call-for-that protestations with a gruff, "Word to the wise—a gentleman accepts graciously. Savvy? I have a houseful of daubs, this might as well go to a good home."

"This" was a portrait of Veronica as a girl. But half-close one's eyes and Mrs. Penbarth's daughter could be its subject. A brace of difficult yet fascinating women, the younger no better than she ought to be. Just as well, then, that the canvas was of Veronica, not Helen. It would be prudent to banish any thought of *her*.

Which was difficult—revealing Scipton to himself in the novel form of a ditherer—since he had this compelling urge to *organise* Helen. She'd said her car was on hire, for instance: horribly wasteful way of doing things, she must have half bought the vehicle by now. . . . Not that it was his worry, thank goodness.

In view of that, why wasn't he happier that it was none of his never-mind?

Banishing Helen was difficult for another reason, he admitted, experiencing a confusing mix of dread, smugness, alarm, and a teenager's expectation. The difficulty being that she kept phoning him at work, wanting to know when he proposed to take her out on that second date. ●

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Our Kind of Guy

by Ed Gorman

That gray Monday morning, the spring rains chill in the hills, I walked around the agency and tried to imagine what it would look like if we lost the Hancher Chicken account.

The furniture would be gone, leaving behind only dusty imprints in the carpeting, like faint symbols of some lost civilization. There'd be no laughter from the coffee room, no oohs and aahs from the screening room when new TV commercials were presented, and no applause from the presentation room when new print ads were displayed. The halls would echo emptily.

And my cousin Rob and I—who'd spent eight years building a family loan into a multimillion-dollar agency—what about us? We'd be back working for somebody else, me as an account exec, Rob as an art director. Advertising people take particular delight in watching their peers fail. People in the other agencies, people we'd successfully competed against, would be smirking for years.

"Are you all right?" Janna said. She's our receptionist. Nights, she teaches aerobics at one of the local health centers. Even seated behind her desk she radiates strength and an imposing nervous energy.

"Rob's not in yet?"

Called "one of the most original crime writers around" by *Kirkus Reviews*, Ed Gorman writes on a remarkable variety of subjects, in genres ranging from horror to traditional mystery. "The only constant [in Gorman's work]" said *Kirkus*, "is the pervasive sadness that soaks even the most grimly retributive stories." Mr. Gorman's new piece for *EQMM* takes a look at a dark side of the relentlessly "upbeat" world of advertising.

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"Not yet." A knowing smile. "He was out with the Murchison people last night."

We have a certain reputation, our agency, for retaining clients the way it was done on the Madison Avenue of old—by supplying them anything their mercenary little hearts desire, up to and including ladies, booze, and, upon occasion, drugs. The Murchison brothers were in their sixties, one with a mild heart ailment, the other with prostate problems, and so you could forget the ladies and the drugs: sour mash was their preference. That, and topless dancers. They might not want to participate, but they sure didn't mind looking.

Rob came in twenty minutes later, just about the time I was looking at the new P/L and discovering how right we were to be scared. Hancher Chickens, the largest poultry producer in the United States, accounted for 64.3 percent of our business. In the past year, victim of raids from other agencies, we'd lost a couple of other key accounts. If we lost Hancher—

Rob Carpenter didn't look hungover, which was remarkable given the fact that he certainly does enjoy his liquor. He's lucky with booze—and women. Even with his violent temper and his numerous girlfriends, they really like him. A balding, slightly pudgy guy with a Rotary-Club smile and a country-club handshake like me is probably better suited to marriage. Temptation rarely comes my way, not unless I ease it into existence with a few crisp new fifty-dollar bills.

I said, "We're going to do it."

"God, I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Close the door."

"Who was your slave last week?"

"You were," I said.

He hated direct orders. Right now I didn't particularly care. He closed the door and came back and sat down deep inside the womb of the big leather armchair. Mahogany wainscoting and leather furniture. My great uncle had been a successful trial attorney and I'd always remembered his magnificent office and decorated my own similarly.

"You've talked to Brandy?" he said.

"I have."

"And she'll do it?"

"She will."

"How much?"

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"Four grand."

He whistled. "What'd she do, join a union?"

"It was that neurosurgeon."

"Oh. Right. That damned neurosurgeon."

In every American city small and large there are beautiful young women who make their living servicing wealthy businessmen. They aren't to be confused with hookers because they're not, not in the strictest sense anyway. Mostly they're the mistresses of the downtown crowd: businessmen, lawyers, judges. When their masters are home with the wife and kids, you usually find these women in the better grade of local pubs. At least that's been my experience. They'll comfort you if you're down about something and play house with your clients if you pay them properly and make sure that your clients at least occasionally take them to Vegas or L.A. or New York. Some of them try to have kids while they're doing all this, but that's a mistake. Brandy Stewart was a former Big Ten cheerleader who'd gotten herself mauled by the black pro running back she'd been living with. She came back home to our little Midwestern burg here to get herself mended and just sort of fell into the life I've described. Because her main man had been black, Brandy was always considered slightly damaged goods. We may love to look at those guys on TV on Sundays, but we still don't like the notion of them sullying the white goods. So Brandy kind of operated on the second tier—generally businessmen considered comers rather than businessmen who'd actually arrived—but all that changed with the white neurosurgeon. A bona fide local medical star with roots that went back four generations into the most prestigious of country clubs, the neurosurgeon had recently had a heart attack and was wanting to do a little lascivious living before the next, and perhaps final one, came. Translation: He needed a sexy young thing. He selected Brandy. We figured he was our kind of guy. Now Brandy was a star and if you wanted her to do you a favor, you paid her big rates. Small Midwestern cities have their own version of the Hollywood star system.

"I hate to pay that bitch that much," Rob said. "Maybe Ted would go for somebody else."

"No way. He's always had this thing for her."

"You're sure she can knock him off the wagon?"

"If she can't, nobody can."

Ted Hancher is the dashing young CEO of Hancher Chickens.

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We got his account six years ago because of a bar conversation. He was very drunk and telling us about how badly he needed to have a little action on the side. We were only too glad to oblige. We got him Brandy. This was right after her black boyfriend beat her up. While the first-tier people saw her as an untouchable despite her shining good looks, Ted Hancher fell in love with her, or something very much like it, almost at once. Brandy reported back all the gory details, of course. How Hancher had been in and out of detox hospitals. How business was down ten percent from the year before, and how they were losing market share to a new wholesale competitor down Texas way, and how Ted was having some personal problems, too. His wife, the mother of his three girls, could no longer, it seemed, inspire lust in him. Few ladies could, apparently. Except Brandy. So we made sure that Brandy saw a lot of him—a whole lot of him—and four months later, as a gift to us for introducing him to Brandy, Ted Hancher gave us his account. We're the ones who came up with "Don't chicken out—chicken in . . . with Hancher." Within eighteen months, his business came screaming back.

"Why the hell did he have to go and get religion, anyway?" Rob said. "Why couldn't he have stayed nice and sleazy like the rest of us?"

That was the one thing neither Rob nor I foresaw. Last year, falling-down drunk in his own living room, still smelling of Brandy and whiskey, Hancher turned on some cable religious channel and started listening to some minister and—And got religion. Drove himself up to Chicago next morning and put himself into a detox program and then drove himself back here eight weeks later all filled with righteousness and sobriety.

Since that time, Ted Hancher had changed. We were forbidden to drink, smoke, curse, or say anything smart about the Christian right, of which he'd become a rigorous supporter. Strictly business. No more whiskey, no more "gals," as he liked to call them.

Over the past two months, good old Ted had also been interviewing ad agencies on the sly. He let it be known that he didn't approve of our lifestyles and that, even if we'd brought his profits up considerably, he could no longer endorse our wicked ways by giving us his ad budget.

We didn't have much time before the Hancher account would be gone and our entire operation with it. Without Hancher, we couldn't handle the considerable overhead.

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That's when I came up with the idea of having Brandy just make a few casual calls to Hancher. And they'd apparently done the trick. Hancher had agreed to meet her tomorrow night at the bar in the new motel out near the airport. Things were looking up. . . . And this time we weren't going to be diplomatic about anything. Brandy was going to get Hancher to have a few drinks — she said that he'd weakened more every time she'd talked to him, and had obviously been thinking about falling off the wagon anyway — and then she was going to get him into a motel room bed. And then Rob and I were going to snap some photos of them. Nothing subtle. It was too late for subtle.

"You still have that Nikon?" I said.

"Uh-huh."

"You used it lately?"

"Not lately."

"Snap some photos today and get the film developed. Make sure everything's working properly."

Another direct order.

"Yes, massah," he said.

"You know, Rob, some days, I don't like you very much."

"You know, Bill, some days, I don't like you at all. In fact, *most* days I don't like you at all."

I grinned. "I can't wait until we see that sanctimonious jerk dead drunk in bed with Brandy."

He grinned back. "Yeah, I just wish we didn't have to pay her so much."

"If we don't, Hancher Chicken is going to walk right out the door."

He stood up, shaking his head. "I hear you, massah. I hear you."

There were two bars in the big new motel. One upstairs, one down, near the pool. I'd agreed to meet Brandy in the parking lot at 9:15 that night. She would tell me how things were going.

I was there, Brandy wasn't.

Midwestern summer had arrived today, as usual without any advance warning. Spring had been sometime between 7:00 A.M. and 7:45 A.M. After that, temperatures climbed well into the eighties. Even now, the thermometer hovered in the high seventies. The full moon and bright stars made it even more like deep green summer.

I stood in the night inhaling diesel fumes floating over from the

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Interstate, cigarette and booze fumes from the bar to my right, and the occasional high sweet aroma of a woman's perfume as she walked from her car to the bar or the pool. Once in a while I got a sharp sniff of chlorine.

Had something gone wrong? I paced. I tried not to look anxious but it wasn't easy. Almost 9:30. And where was Brandy?

Then she was there suddenly, coming around the far corner, a fetching beauty in a tan summer-weight suit and her red hair set back into a gentle chignon. She had great poise, even a kind of elegance. I still hadn't figured out why she'd go with a black guy, but I guess that we all do strange things sometimes. All of us.

When she was a few feet away, she smiled and said, "He's pretty drunk. That's why I'm late. He was all over me. I couldn't push him away."

"Fantastic."

"Another half-hour and we should be in bed."

"Rob brought his Nikon. We're all ready."

I checked my watch. "You have nine thirty-six?"

She checked her watch, nodded. "And you have the money—cash, the way I asked?"

"Cash the way you asked."

I slipped her the bulky number-ten white envelope. No writing front or back. Hundred-dollar bills.

She sighed. "That dinner with my neurosurgeon? I had to cancel it."

"Uh-huh." She almost couldn't work tonight because at the last moment her neurosurgeon had wanted to take her to dinner. His wife had had to go out of town to visit a sick sister. This was a perfect night for them to get together.

"Well, he wasn't happy about it. He expects me back at my apartment by eleven."

"What'd you tell him you were doing?"

"Seeing an old girlfriend." She frowned. "But that's not important. *He's* paying the rent on the apartment and if he ever dumped me, I sure couldn't afford to live there. I want to keep him happy."

"Forty-five minutes max, Brandy. You'll be back at your apartment in plenty of time."

She looked worried. "I hope so. This is a good thing. He's a neurosurgeon."

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I smiled. "Yeah, I wish he was a podiatrist. Maybe you wouldn't be so worried."

"I'd better get back there."

I watched her walk away. She was a fine-looking woman but I felt a kind of sorrow for her. She had another five years before the downtown crowd would consider her too old. There were always eager newcomers to take her place. It really was a little like Hollywood when you thought about it.

Upstairs in the bar, Rob said, "I was about ready to give up."

"So was I."

I told him what happened.

"How about we have two more bombers and go snap some photos?" Rob always called them bombers. I always called them hits. Ad people like to nickname things. I guess we just enjoy cleverness, especially our own.

He had his bombers and I had my hits. We spent the time talking about some of the expansion plans we had. We needed to upgrade the software of our computer graphics, for one thing. The kids in our art department were always reminding us of how we should maybe spend a little less on our fun and more on upgrading agency capabilities. Rob and I had the Chris-Craft, true; and the state-of-the-art fishing cabin up on Blue Lake; and the expensive sports cars and the European vacations—but if our plan worked tonight, we wouldn't have to worry. We could upgrade the agency *and* keep on buying toys for ourselves. With the photos we were about to get of Ted Hancher, our problems would be over.

2.

Room 238 was around back. All the parking slots on this wing were empty except one: Ted Hancher's Maserati was pulled up to 238.

Rob had his trusty Nikon. He let me tiptoe up to the door first. Only darkness shone behind the curtain next to the door. No sound from inside, only the night sounds of dogs and frogs and prowling cats near the creek a hundred yards south of us.

I tried the knob, turning it gently, gently. It turned to the right, unlocked.

I tried to remember how the rooms were laid out here. Though the motel was new, Rollo Baines, one of the people in our accounting department, a man who can pad a client bill with an artistry that brings tears to the eyes—at least when he's sober, which isn't

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all that often, to be perfectly honest—Rollo had already inaugurated several of the rooms here and had invited Rob and me out to have a few shooters and hits with whatever gal he'd picked up trawling the downtown bars that night.

I closed my eyes, pictured the room: double bed on the right-hand wall, easy chairs, desk, and closet on left. I pictured a little more, trying to find where the light switch was in the main room. To the right of the door, I recalled.

I'd have to push the door open, snap on the light, and then have Rob come racing in right behind me, snapping pictures right away. Couldn't give Hancher time to flee the room.

I whispered: "You ready?"

He wasn't exactly sober, but he did manage to raise his camera, as if he were displaying it on a commercial, and waggle it in my direction.

I took a deep breath.

This all had to happen quickly. Very quickly.

I put my hand on the doorknob again.

This was going to be fun, actually, seeing Ted's face. He'd been getting pretty sanctimonious lately—"Your whole agency should stop running around so much and go to church—" so it was going to be fun to see him try and be self-righteous after tonight. After all, we'd have pictures.

I took another deep breath.

Then gave the door a fast inward push.

Found the light switch to my right.

"Caught you!" I said, as the lights came on, and Rob came stumbling in behind me, already snapping photos.

Ted had stripped all the bed clothing off the mattress and laid it in the middle of the floor. From the doorway, I could make out the shape of a body wrapped up inside the bedclothes. I didn't see Brandy anywhere. I had a pretty good idea of where she was.

I walked over to the bedclothes and pulled down the brown cover far enough that I could see her face and the bloody wound on the side of her head. Somebody had hit her pretty hard with something. I studied her eyes and nostrils for a long moment. No signs of life. I covered her up again.

Rob quickly closed the door behind us.

"Ted? Ted? Where the hell are you?" I said.

But I knew where he was. The bathroom door was closed. And from behind it, I could hear him sobbing.

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I looked at Rob, shook my head. We both glanced down at the bedclothes.

I was just about to go through the motions of checking her wrist and neck for a pulse when Ted came out of the bathroom looking pretty dead himself. He slumped against the far wall. He was still sobbing.

I got him before he sank completely to the floor.

I half-carried him to one of the easy chairs and sat him down.

"See if there's any booze," I said to Rob.

"God, no," Ted said. "That's how I got into this mess." He looked up at me with the pleading eyes of a confused and frightened child. "I fall off the wagon one time and look what happens." He raised his sorrowful eyes. "She's dead."

"I know she's dead," I said.

He'd dressed himself, but badly. He wore only one sock, and he had his shirt buttoned wrong, and he seemed to have combed the left side of his hair but not the other. He was usually handsome enough to make the ladies give him second and third looks. But not tonight.

He smelled of sweat, urine, whiskey, and blood.

"What the hell happened?" I said.

He just kept shaking his head. It would take hours before any of this became real to him. Now he was just in a foggy nightmare of booze and terror.

"She tripped," he said.

"Tripped? What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's true. Honest to God, it's true. She got up to go to the bathroom before we—well, you know, made love—and I had the covers pushed off on the floor, and she got her foot tangled up in them, and she started to fall, and then her head hit the corner of that wall and—"

He shook his head some more. And started softly crying.

This was even worse than losing the account. You lose it, you always have a chance of winning it back at some point. But this—If the police didn't believe Ted's somewhat unlikely tale, he'd be charged with a minimum of manslaughter, meaning prison. Meaning his number two, Sam Richmond, would then become CEO. And Richmond didn't like me at all. Couple of years back my wife Shirley had a mastectomy and I guess I kind of lost interest in having sex with her. Couldn't help it, really. I'm just a normal guy with normal needs and desires. And I want a normal woman.

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So I guess I started running around even more than I did before Shirley had the cancer problem. And Richmond saw me one night in a parking lot making out with this cute little secretary from one of the other agencies. And he never forgave me. My wife and his belong to Junior League together and Richmond and his wife stopped up a couple of times to see Shirley in the hospital—When you live in a small state capital in Wisconsin, you have to be careful—

If Richmond took over the company, our agency would be out in twenty-four hours.

"We've got to get her out of here," I said.

Ted raised his eyes to me. "Not call the police?"

"You can't afford to call the police," I said. "That story of yours just doesn't sound believable, Ted."

"It may be true," Rob said behind me, "but that doesn't mean people will believe it." Then he said, "But I don't know where the hell we can take her."

Ted said, "You're really not going to call the police? You're going to help me?"

"Hell yes, we're going to help you, Ted. We're your friends."

He started getting teary again. "I haven't always been easy to get along with lately. And here you guys—"

"You'd do the same for us," Rob said.

Ted looked over at Brandy lying there and said, "I just had a thought." Then, "You think we can get her in the car without anybody seeing us?"

"I've got my sports van," I said. "And I can whip it around here and back it right up to the door."

"But we still haven't figured out what we're going to do with her," Rob said. He'd sobered up fast. So had I.

"Your fishing cabin," Ted said.

"That's a long way," I said.

"Thirty miles is all. And there're all the deep woods where you could bury her." Then he jumped up from the chair and started pacing. "God, listen to me. A woman is lying on the floor dead and all I can think about is how I'm going to get rid of her body." He ran trembling fingers through his hair. "God, I'm such a hypocrite. Supposedly, I found God after I gave up drinking. And now look—"

He was going to snap soon, I knew, and if he snapped that

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meant the police, and the police led ultimately to one person: Sam Richmond.

"How can I ever face my wife and daughters after this?" he said.

And then he flung himself on the bed and started sobbing again.

Fast. We had to work fast now. Before he picked up the phone and called—

"Ted," I said, leaning over the bed and half-shouting at him as if he was deaf. "Ted, I'm going to go get the truck. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

I glanced at Rob. He was just as scared as I was. He was no doubt having visions of dour Sam Richmond, too.

"Ted?" I said. This time I took his shoulder and shook him gently. "Ted?"

He'd stopped sobbing. Now there was just silence. I wasn't sure which scared me more.

He got up off the bed and pushed past me as if I wasn't even there.

Then he went over and knelt next to the body and bent down and kissed Brandy once, chastely, on the forehead.

No sobs, no sighs, no words.

Then he proceeded to wrap her up in the bedclothes. It was like watching the burial ritual of some strange Native American tribe, preparing a corpse for the pyre, or preparing it to lie on the edge of a cliff where the winds would ultimately dash the body to the jagged rocks below.

Tighter and tighter and tighter he wrapped her, until I realized he was getting obsessive, at which point I went over and stopped him and got him to his feet.

Rob was going over the mattress and then the carpeting and then the bathroom. He reported back. "No blood that I could find. And even if there're a few drops, they wouldn't be enough to make a maid suspicious."

"Who got the room?" I said.

"I did," Ted said.

"Good. I'll go get my sports van. We'll put her in back and then drop off your key." To Rob I said, "Make sure there's nothing left behind."

"Yes, massah."

Ted watched us strangely for a moment. We'd always presented ourselves as professionals, never letting him see, especially when we were drunk, the tensions that lay below the surface.

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"I can't thank you guys enough," Ted said.

"Sure you can," Rob said. "You can let us keep your account."

Ted didn't quite know how to take Rob's words. Was he kidding?

"You guys have the account wrapped up," he said. He nodded to the corpse inside the bedclothes. "Forever."

I went and got my sports van. I'd hauled a lot of different things in it before, but never a dead woman. Brandy's nice white neurosurgeon was going to be a lonely guy tonight, and for a lot of nights following, until he found a new Brandy to replace her. Luckily for him, the Brandy model was pretty much mass-produced.

3.

The blisters started after about an hour of working the spade. We had two of them, long-handled ones that I kept in the small garage next to the fishing cabin. We were in the pines up above the cabin, the only light the Coleman lantern that sat on the ever-growing mound of dirt Rob and I had dug up.

Rob and I. Ted was still in too much shock to be helpful. He sat over in the shadows, just out of reach of the Coleman's glow, watching us. Brandy, still swathed in bedclothes, lay stretched out back on the edge of the woods.

Sweat ran from my head into my mouth. Every few moments I had to pause to slap mosquitos. The earth was muddy from the rains, which didn't make for easy work. The blisters were the worst. They hurt and they bled. I resented Ted. He was the one who'd killed her. We were the ones who had to bury her.

Took nearly two hours before we got five feet down. We'd been going to go six feet down but that was just too much work.

A couple of times I had to stop completely and run down to the river in front of the cabin and just soak my hands.

The second time I came back up, I knelt down next to Ted and said, "How're you doing?"

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"Yeah, Ted, she kinda is."

"We're going to get caught, aren't we?"

He said all this in a monotone, staring off in the general direction of the Coleman lantern that sat atop the mound of dirt accumulating on the west side of the open grave. Stray wisps of lantern light painted him even paler than he already was. Brandy wasn't the only one who was dead. So, in his way, was Ted.

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I went back to help finish the job.

"You sure took your time," Rob said.

"Rob, he's cracking up."

He stared at me a long moment then rested on his shovel. His shirt was off. His hairless chest ran with sweat. "You really think we can get away with this?"

"Nobody ever comes out here."

"What if a stray dog comes by and gets curious?"

"That's why we're going down at least five feet. No dog's going to dig five feet. Neither is any human. Nobody'll ever find her." I leaned closer so I could whisper. "And we'll have the Hancher account in our pocket. Permanently."

"I sure hope you're right."

I looked at the torn and bloody palms of my hands.

"I don't think this is in my job description," Rob said, and we both started digging again.

I took a drafting course once, so I have a pretty good sense of length and dimension and things like that. After another twenty minutes of digging, the Coleman lantern riding a mound that kept getting higher and higher, I said, "Let me measure."

"How you going to measure?"

"The shovel handle."

Despite himself, Rob was impressed.

"I'm six foot even," I said, setting the handle up to my shoulder. "So this is about five feet."

"Close enough."

"Let's put it in the—" I paused. It wasn't easy to say the word. "Grave."

I stood on the edge of the opening and dropped the shovel down so that it was standing straight up.

Five feet even.

"I don't want to shovel anymore," Rob said.

"Neither do I."

"But then I want to make sure no dog is going to dig up the grave."

"So do I."

"So what should we do?" Rob said.

"Let's dig a little while longer."

He agreed and we set to work.

I'm not sure when the noises started behind me. I doubt I heard the first few, and even when I *did* hear them I had no idea of what

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they were or what they signified. They were like kind of faint wailing noises, like somebody crying quietly in a distant room in a big empty house. They were clear, as they would be in horror movies, but sort of muffled. And that's what was eerie about them.

I have to admit they scared me a little, enough so that when I turned around I wouldn't have been surprised to see some kind of specter there. The night's events had unnerved me more than I'd realized.

But it wasn't a specter. It was Ted. He sat like a skinny Buddha, crying into his hands. His crying is what I'd heard.

Rob looked at me and I looked at Rob and I knew we were thinking the same thing. No problem disposing of the body. This would be a good, safe place for it. What wasn't good or safe was Ted. At any point he could pick up the phone, dial the police, and admit what he'd done. And he'd pull us in with him as accomplices after the fact.

I shook my head and said, more sharply than I'd intended, "Ted, get hold of yourself, for God's sake. Be a man."

"Yeah, some man *I* am," he said through his tears. "I just killed an innocent woman."

Rob grinned. "People called Brandy a lot of things, but 'innocent' wasn't one of them."

"You jerk!"

At first, I thought that maybe all his crying had altered the timbre of his voice somehow, that for just a few words Ted sounded just like a woman.

Then I saw her coming out of the woods behind Ted. And that's when I saw Ted jump to his feet, his tears turning instantly to laughter.

The bedclothes were empty now. She must have slipped out and gone into the woods right after I got back to shoveling.

"You jerk!" Brandy shouted again at Rob.

She looked pretty bad, her nice tan suit all wrinkled from being rolled up inside the bedclothes. Her chignon had fallen and some of her hair was in her face.

"What the hell's going on here? How come Brandy isn't dead?" Rob said.

"Brandy isn't dead," I said, "because she never was dead. She was part of the gag."

"What gag?"

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"God, Rob, figure it out for yourself. The Lady Fair here double-crossed us, right?" I looked directly at Brandy.

"I want Rob to apologize to me," she said. She was genuinely angry.

"About what?" I said.

"About what? About him saying that nobody ever called me innocent. That was a cheap shot if I ever heard one."

"Apologize to the lady, Rob," I said.

"Apologize? The hell I will. After they set us up this way?"

Ted was still laughing. "God, you should have seen your faces when Brandy came walking out of the woods."

"Yeah, real funny, Ted."

"Hey, don't get pious on me," Ted said. "Not after what you two were planning—catch me in a motel room with Brandy and snap my photo. You two bozos may not have heard this, but blackmail's against the law."

"How much did she want to tell you about our little plan?" I said.

"Four thousand," Ted said.

"Do I get my apology or not, Rob?" Brandy wanted to know.

"Four thousand?" I said. "That's what *we* paid her. She made *eight grand* for tonight."

Ted was amused by this. He smiled and spread his hands and said, "That's what you get in a capitalist system."

My palms hurt. I held them up close to the Coleman lantern for inspection. They were raw and bloody.

"Well, at least you two got a little exercise in tonight." Ted laughed, still pleased with himself.

But Rob wasn't pleased with him at all.

Rob's temper broke just then. Before I could so much as try to grab him, he'd flung himself across the grave and had his hands on Ted Hancher's throat. All the tension, horror, and fear of the night had finally overwhelmed him. I couldn't really blame him for being so angry, but I could blame him for taking it out on our number one client.

By the time I got around to the other side of the grave and got my hands on his shoulders, Rob had probably hit Ted in the face eight or nine times. Ted's face was a bloody mess. Rob kept right on whumping. Brandy screamed once for every time Rob's fist met Ted's face.

There was only a foot of space between grave opening and dirt

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mound. I had to stand there to try and pull Rob away from Ted who, by now, really did sound like a woman. His voice shrieked through the lonely pine forest.

Rob was so far gone in rage that he didn't even know I was there. He'd locked into Ted's face as his target and he kept striking home. This kind of punishment would seriously injure or maybe even kill Ted in a few more minutes.

Brandy went right on screaming, too.

I finally managed to slide my arm over Rob's shoulder and across his neck, a kind of informal choke hold that was strong enough to pull him out of striking distance.

Then, of course, he started swinging and kicking at me, anything to break my hold on him.

One of his kicks, a purely accidental one, struck Brandy in the hip and knocked her backwards.

I'll never forget what she looked like right then, balanced there on the very edge of the grave. Her arms windmilled just like one of those old silent-movie comedians about to take a backwards pratfall. She must have sensed that something terrible was going to happen because she fought her falling with everything she had, even to calling out pleas for us to grab her.

All this happened in a second or two, understand.

And then all her furious windmilling went for nothing because Brandy fell backwards into the five-foot grave.

And disappeared.

Later on, Ted said he'd heard her neck snapping, but I personally think he was just imagining things. She'd been screaming too loudly for any of us to hear anything else.

She was in the grave and now there was only silence. Utter silence.

I hadn't really noticed before how the full moon silvered the pine boughs; and how solemn the barn owls sounded tonight; and how chill the winds had gotten suddenly.

I noticed all this in the two or three moments of silence following her fall.

Rob walked over and looked down.

I couldn't move. I felt paralyzed.

"Oh God," he said. "Oh God."

Then he walked a few feet away and vomited. I suppose it was all the booze we'd had tonight. That and the terror of thinking that Brandy had actually been dead. And now—

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Ted, his face still bloody, walked over to the edge of the grave, too, and looked down and said the very same thing Rob had. "Oh God. Oh God." Rob's had been more like a curse. Ted's was more like a prayer.

After a time, I gathered myself again and jumped down in the grave and did all the things I should have done back in the motel room, checked various pulse points and listened for a heartbeat. But this time she was really dead.

I got back up top and said, "Ted, we have to make a decision right now. You understand?"

For the first time tonight, he looked present and accounted for. Completely.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, we do have to make a decision, don't we?"

The realtors call once in a while and wonder why I'm not interested in selling the fishing cabin since I haven't used it for the past two seasons. Just lies there silent and dusty like a corpse.

Rob has moved away. Milwaukee. VP in a video production house. Said he couldn't take the pressure anymore. Every time he turned on the local news, he expected to hear that a body had been unearthed out by the fishing cabin owned by two prominent local ad men.

Ted never has recovered completely. He sees a shrink twice a week, but since he can't tell him the truth it doesn't really help all that much. He told me once that he'd almost called the police and told them what had happened but that the whole story, involving a woman he actually used to sleep with on the side, would have destroyed his family, and he just couldn't do that to them. He also signed a twenty-five-year contract with my agency so that even if something should happen to him, Sam Richmond would have to buy out the contract for something like two million dollars if he wanted to fire us and hire another agency.

Last spring my wife died and left me a good deal of money. A few years ago her sudden departure, and her largesse, would have sent me back to the singles bars.

But those days seem to be behind me now, and not just sex; booze, too. Rarely touch the stuff now. I just feel . . . adrift . . . looking for someplace that feels like a home.

We found a good, safe place for Brandy.

But where's a good, safe place for me? ●

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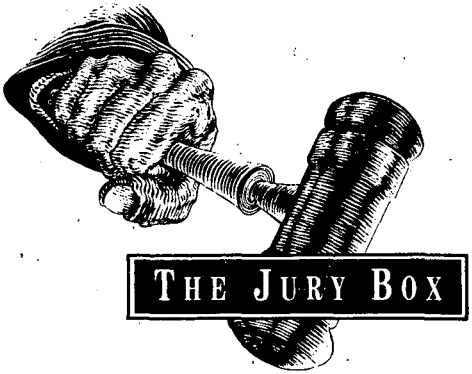

by Jon L. Breen

Despite the inherent fascination of reading somebody else's mail, collected letters in book form are relatively rare. The author must be famous enough for a publisher to be convinced of the commercial value; the author should be a good letter-writer, which even great writers aren't necessarily; and in the case of relatively recent subjects there must be a willingness of the author, or more often the author's estate, to have the letters published. Of collected correspondence of mystery writers, the best and most extensive is undoubtedly *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler* (1981). Letters between Chandler and fellow novelist James M. Fox were collected in a small 1978 volume, making Fox surely the most obscure mystery writer to have his mail put before the public. Some of John D. MacDonald's letters to and from comedian Dan Rowan were collected in *A Friendship* (1986), an intensely readable and sometimes painfully revealing book. A tantalizing sampling of the correspondence of Anthony Boucher and Vincent Starrett was published in the 1975 chapbook *Sincerely, Tony; Faithfully, Vincent,* while Starrett's missives to and from fellow Sherlockian Gray Chandler Briggs were collected in *"Dear Chandler—"; "Dear Briggs—"* (1990).

There are any number of figures whose correspondence mystery scholars and voyeurs would love to see between covers: Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Ross Macdonald, Dashiell Hammett, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Rex Stout, Julian Symons, Ellis Peters. Surely near the top of the wish list would have to be the brilliant, complex, multifaceted, widely (and wildly)

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admired but sometimes controversial Dorothy L. Sayers, creator of Lord Peter Wimsey who later deserted detective fiction for religious drama and Dante translation. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist* (St. Martin's, $26.95) is the first of a projected two volumes, selected and meticulously annotated by Sayers's friend and biographer Barbara Reynolds. P. D. James contributes a preface. Sayers was a lively and engaging letter writer even as a child. Whether your interest is mystery fiction, early-20th-century social history, theology, or feminism, you'll find much of interest here.

*** Lindsey Davis: *Last Act in Palmyra,* Mysterious, $21.95. Marcus Didius Falco tours the first-century-A.D. Roman empire with a theater troupe, partly looking for a missing female musician, partly serving as a company playwright-cum-dramaturge, and mostly trying to solve a series of murders. Generally, I still think the Roman detectives are at their best when they stay in Rome, but the background of theatrical life, the continuing relationship of Falco and Helena Justina, and the whodunit plot are all expertly handled. The main downside is that the book is about 150 pages longer than it should be—but all too many mysteries in the current market are, including the one that follows.

*** David Handler: *The Girl Who Ran Off with Daddy,* Doubleday, $23.95. When septuagenarian novelist Thor Gibbs runs off with his 18-year-old stepdaughter Clethra Finegold, tabloid headlines and a million-dollar book contract—for Clethra—result. Celebrity ghostwriter Stewart Hoag is offered the job of collaborating with the teenager and, as usual, solves some murders along the way with the ostensible aid of basset hound Lulu. Handler does a good job with his puzzle plot and characters, differentiating their exaggerated speech patterns entertainingly. The narration is the kind of first person smartass that can be so annoying in the wrong hands, but Handler's version is admirably restrained.

** Gary Lovisi: *Hellbent on Homicide,* Scarlett Fever Press, 3160 Brady Lake Road, Ravenna, OH 44266; $14.95. In 1962, Bay City cops Griff and Fats seek a killer of young women unencumbered by the Miranda ruling and other sentimental impediments to effective law enforcement. The brief first novel of a longtime fan publisher can give considerable pleasure to the right reader who approaches it in the right frame of mind; it is a devotee's intense

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and enthusiastic homage to hardboiled fiction. The posturing narrative and dialogue, simplified plot and characterization, and broad-strokes atmosphere and action suggest a comic book or radio show more than a novel. As Andrew Vachss suggests in a back-cover blurb, the closest stylistic comparison is probably to *Black Mask* pioneer Carroll John Daly.

* Jessica Fletcher and Donald Bain: *A Deadly Judgment,* Signet, $5.99. This latest novel based on the *Murder, She Wrote* TV series has its points, I guess—smooth style, Boston background, and a cute Least Suspected Person solution—but it also features one of the all-time most ridiculous fictional trials. There is never even a hint that the prosecution has any evidence to accuse baked-bean heir William Brannigan of his brother's murder. Realistic by comparison is the flamboyant defender's decision to bring in mystery writer Jessica as a jury consultant.

Fawcett Crest is reprinting one of the finest series in American mystery fiction, the Travis McGee novels of John D. MacDonald, with new introductions à la Bantam's successful Rex Stout line. The apparent difference is that the first two novels in the series, both originally published in 1964, *The Deep Blue Good-bye* and *Nightmare in Pink* ($5.99 each), carry the same introduction by Carl Hiassen, who grew up in the Fort Lauderdale neighborhood where the McGee books are set, as well as the same inside-back-cover memoir by Maynard MacDonald, JDM's son. Thus, new readers should seek out both but longtime JDM collectors can make do with only one or the other.

Also among the reprints is a trade paper edition of Meyer Levin's classic 1956 novel *Compulsion* (Carroll & Graf, $11.95), a masterful fictionalization of the Leopold/Loeb murders and subsequent trial. (With all the interest in real and fictional courtrooms in recent years, will more classics of the Big Trial novel be resurrected? How about Al Dewlen's *Twilight of Honor* [1961] or William Harrington's *Which the Justice, Which the Thief* [1963]?)

Caveat emptor department: The paperback anthology *The Crime Lover's Casebook* (Signet, $5.99), edited by Jerome Charyn, includes a couple of quotes from this column about the collection's quality and star name value. What it *doesn't* include, even on the verso of the title page, is the information that it was first published in hardcover in 1993 under the title *The New Mystery.*

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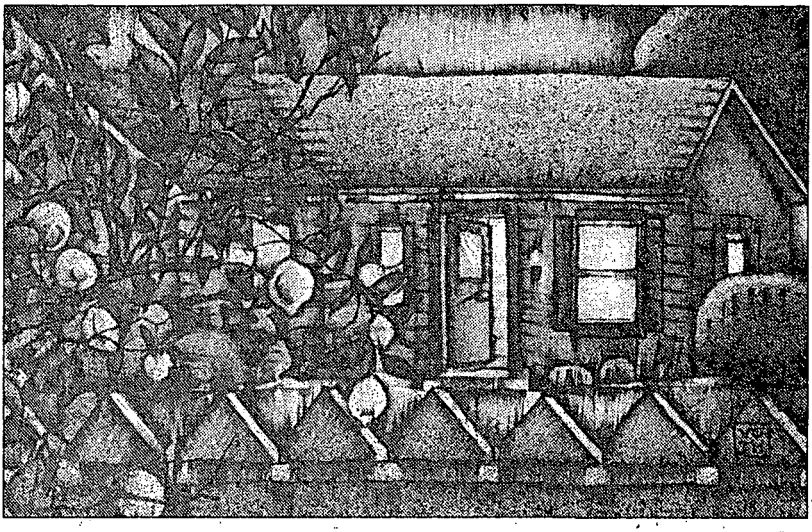

Art by Greg Voth

LEMONS

by Perri O'Shaughnessy

Toward the end of February, Doris noticed that the lemon tree in the backyard was heavy with lemons.

She opened the door to the back porch and stepped out into the thicket of pampas grass, forging a trail almost to the fence line, and stood looking at it. In spite of her complete neglect, and some damage to the trunk, the tree had somehow hung on during the dry Salinas summer and cool winter. Hundreds of lemons, big, round, so ripe they were colored almost orange, scented the air around the tree, weighing down the low branches. The tree sprawled across the yard, green and disheveled, propped up against the redwood fence. In the shadows underneath, more lemons lay half-buried in the moist dirt.

Lemons were useless fruit. Fresh lemon juice with water and sugar wasn't half as good as the store-bought kind, in spite of the chemicals they added to concentrate. And who made real pies

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these days? She had a faint memory that her mother had made one once, but she didn't have the slightest idea how to make a lemon meringue pie. And then, didn't she read somewhere you could put lemon juice in your hair and bleach it? But her hair was black streaked with gray.

She returned to her work at the computer, billing out Dr. Pelosi's medical services and stuffing the printed-out bills into the window envelopes. At two o'clock she stacked them neatly on the kitchen table, as always, and stretched out on the couch with the Mickey Spillane she was reading, her tray of cheese and crackers right beside her. The fact that she liked violent crime novels was one of the many little secrets that no one knew about her. She had switched from Agatha Christie last year, when Gene died.

In 1995, *EQMM* published a story whose status as a winner in MWA's short story contest superceded classification in our Department of First Stories. With their second short story we add the O'Shaughnessy sisters to our official list of debut writers. Last year the team—lawyer Pamela and freelance writer Mary—also published a first novel, *Motion to Suppress* (Delacorte). Ellery Queen would have been delighted at the discovery of these new writers, since the Queen name too stood for a collaboration of close relatives. ¶

At four she put the envelopes in her briefcase and pushed her arms into the blue suit jacket she always wore to go out, hunching her shoulders a little to adjust the fabric in back and buttoning the bottom two buttons. She blended in better on the street in her jacket, like any business person on an errand, and no one cast a second glance at her. She liked how safe that made her feel.

She locked the door and walked down the hill to the post office, because you had to get your exercise, and found her place in a short line. She let a girl with a package go in front of her. Otherwise she would get the red-haired young man who kept up a steady stream of conversation, asking her questions about her day that always made her feel a little upset. As if he were her friend! What did he care!

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At the supermarket on the way home, she bought herself some Tiparillos so she could have a smoke after supper. Right before bed she washed the dishes. The yellow curtains above the sink reminded her of the lemon tree. She pulled them apart and leaned over the soapy water, peering out into the blackness. She couldn't see it, but she knew it was there, bulky against the night sky. What a shame she couldn't think of a single thing to do with all those lemons!

Like always, she slept on her side of the bed, even though Gene had been gone a year now. He wouldn't like her spreading out too much on the bed, wanton and sloppy. Her side was big enough to hold her, and that was all the space she needed. She groaned a little settling in, and remembered it was the only sound she had made all day. At least she didn't talk to herself. She would call someone tomorrow, maybe the doctor about her stiff neck, or the technician at ComputerFix to talk about the keys sticking.

Gene had once handled such outside business for her. She had grown used to staying home, taking care of him, letting him handle all the little hassles other people represented. As he got sicker, though, he had gotten meaner, and she hadn't much wanted to deal with him either. At the dinner table, toward the end, they had read, the business section for him and a murder mystery for her. His funeral service had been hard on her, having to socialize with relatives Gene wouldn't speak to when he was alive. It was a relief when he was finally laid in the ground and she could go home and shut the damn door on all of them.

The next day, after she finished the billing and she'd had her nap and cup of coffee, she took some paper bags out back and started picking lemons. You couldn't just let them rot on the tree. It would be a ridiculous waste. The lemons had grown so ripe they tore at the base as she plucked them, so a little skin came off. They would have to be used quickly. She picked two large sacks, but only one fit into the refrigerator, so she set one sack out front until she could figure out what to do with it.

That night, she couldn't get to sleep. Her neck and shoulders ached. Early in the morning she rolled herself out of bed and took a hot shower, letting the scalding spray loosen up the tight muscles in her shoulders. She skipped brushing her teeth and looked for a long time into the foggy mirror. Not much to see, just the same old face looking back. She could hardly believe she'd ever been young. What was the point of getting dressed?

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The point was—she had forgotten the point. She shook her head, chastising herself for the interior blabberings, watching the woman in the mirror straighten up, push her chin out, and firm up her mouth, but could do nothing about something furious in her eyes.

At four o'clock, as she locked up and picked up her briefcase, she saw the old couple walking up the street, just as they always did. Ten years before, they had come to the door to introduce themselves when she and Gene were moving in, but Gene had made it plain he and Doris were not the kaffee-klatsch type. They had better things to do than sit around with old geezers nattering about the weather. The couple walked downtown every day, just as she did, and sometimes she couldn't avoid passing them. Then the old woman would say, "Hello there," and she would answer with a half-smile that meant she was trying to be polite but after all she was a busy woman, and continue on her way.

This particular afternoon, Doris stood back in the shadows of her front porch and watched them. Where did they live, anyway? To her surprise they turned into the driveway of the house two doors farther up the hill.

That night, she found herself thinking about the old couple. She had snubbed them about a hundred times, and they still said, "Hello there."

Maybe she would give them the extra sack of lemons. They would be thrilled at her friendly action and ask her to stay for a cup of tea, and they would all have a nice chat about something or other. Visualizing herself holding a china teacup, sitting in their armchair, telling them about the lemons, made her notice something tight and hard in her throat that made it hard to swallow.

The next day it rained, and the old people didn't go for a walk as usual. Doris watched some nature shows on TV, but she couldn't stay interested. She was feeling anxious about the lemons. She could just set them out on the curb and somebody who knew what to do with them would pick them up, and she would be done with the problem. She actually hauled the sack out there, but with the rain falling on the sack she had a bad feeling no one would take the lemons after all, so she brought them right back and set them by the front door.

On Friday at four-fifteen, at the post office, she looked at the smooth hands of the woman postal clerk, wondering if she would like the lemons. "Fifty-eight cents," the clerk said, and Doris

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stared with fascination at her face, which resolved just for an instant from the general blur, so that she could see the clerk was a soft-skinned woman of about forty, motherly somehow, with chapped lips and long dark eyelashes. As she got out the exact change, Doris lowered her eyes, feeling as though she had been intrusive to look so closely. "Have a good day," the woman clerk said, and she could just make out as she turned quickly away that the woman was smiling.

Rain gave way to a gray overcast which faded into darkness by the time she finished her supper, and here they came, walking slowly past, toward their house. She felt like running out with the sack and giving it to them, but at the same time she had begun to feel very worried about actually talking to them after all these years. What if they were pests and started coming to her door all the time? She would have to move, which would involve moving men and having her references checked by cold-eyed bankers. . . . These thoughts were very frightening, so she stayed inside, watching them turn into their driveway, watching their lights flick on at the top of the hill, bright in the dusk.

The house had grown cold but she didn't feel like making a fire just for herself. She had her smoke and finished her novel by about seven, and then there was nothing to do. Should she have a hot bath or turn on the TV? Dismayed, she looked around for some activity to grab her and involve her, but it was all so familiar, she had used it all up, seen thousands of programs, read thousands of pages. . . . She stepped outside into the cold night without her jacket and pulled the door shut without locking it, picked up the sack of lemons, and sped up the hill.

No bell or buzzer, a locked screen door. She stood there, waiting, as though they must feel her presence, the loud unseemly emotion radiating from her, but they didn't come, so she rapped her knuckles against the screen. An interior light came on and before she could run away the old lady was standing there, surprised as hell, and a commotion erupted, with Doris holding out the heavy bag and the old man's face popping up behind the screen and the three of them saying things she was too upset to register.

Then the door swung open and she was drawn inside. She stood in their living room, which was smaller than hers and shocking, so modern and cheerful with its white walls and bright pillows. The first clear thing she noticed was the old man's hat on his bald head, a shapeless tan golf hat he usually wore outside. He was

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awfully tall; his head seemed to scrape the low ceiling. His wife had put on some slipper socks. She was so close, Doris had to look right into her wide blue eyes, with the wispy eyebrows raised high above them, which made Doris feel dizzy and like running away. "Sit down! Sit down!" the old lady was saying.

"I have supper in the oven and I have to get back in a minute," Doris said. Or that was what she meant to say, she wasn't sure how the words came out with the roaring in her ears.

"Well, we're—"

"I have a lemon tree and lots of lemons and I thought you might like some." She offered the bag.

They looked at each other. "We have a tree, too," the old man said. "Over by the side of the house. Boxes and boxes of 'em. Look!" He disappeared through a swinging door and came out a moment later with a wooden crate. Tenderly, he lifted out a lemon as large and deep-colored as her lemons and showed it to her.

The old lady had taken the paper bag and was holding it uncertainly. "But it's so nice to see you," she said. They were sitting down on the pretty pillows now, but what Doris wanted was to go. All she had to offer was the lemons and they didn't need them, and she had to get out before they started engulfing her with pity, kindness, all sorts of sticky messy feelings. Just then the phone rang in the kitchen, and the old man pushed through a swinging door to answer it.

"I should have realized you had a couple of trees," Doris said. "You can see them from the street, but I don't walk that way. I have to go now." She pushed herself up and smoothed down her skirt. The old man came in and both women looked at him. In a very low and gentle voice he said to his wife, "It's your sister. She's wondering if she can come over with a video she just taped, so we can all watch it together."

"Oh no! Thank you, but I really couldn't!" Doris said, interrupting in her panic, thinking, now they were starting; they were trying to keep her, and she couldn't endure hours and hours with them; it was too painful and too powerful to feel their closeness. They looked at her, embarrassed.

"I only meant . . . you understand . . . just me and my wife and her sister . . ." he said.

"Oh, of course!" she cried, her cheeks flaming, grinning idiotically. "What a great idea! You really must! And I'll be going. . . ." With such tumult inside her, she could hardly keep track of what

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she was saying. Her hands kept smoothing down her clothes as if they wished they might somehow erase her horrible gaffe. Including herself where she wasn't invited! She would never forgive herself!

"Tell her no," the old lady said to her husband with surprising firmness. "Maybe we could come see it tomorrow at her house. Tell her I'm working on a project."

And now, realizing she had butted in and commanded them to do something they didn't even want to do, Doris felt utter despair. She was hopeless. She had to get out of there quickly, and then she would never see them again.

"You're always working on a project," the old man said. "When could we go over tomorrow? We've got the laundry, and that church deal in the afternoon."

"Just tell her," she said. He disappeared again, and the old lady turned back to her, saying, "We have such a small place. The TV's in the bedroom. We would all have to sit on the bed. It's real inconvenient."

The old man came back out. This time he was carrying a plastic sack with frozen yellow muffins in it. "We freeze the juice in muffin tins," he said. "You should try it. It keeps forever that way. Only problem is, it's hard to pop them out. I tried a hair dryer but that melted them too fast, then after a couple of years I tried setting the pan over the pilot light on the stove just for a minute or two. That worked fine."

"Then they all fell out of the pan onto the floor," his wife said.

"Got her floor spick-and-span for once. No complaints from the lady of the house that time. Ha ha."

They didn't seem disgusted by her, or angry at her. In fact, they hardly seemed to be paying any attention to her. Timidly, she asked, "What do you do with the muffins?"

"Put one in a big glass of orange juice in the morning. Makes it taste better. Do you have a juicer?"

"No, but maybe I'll get one. That's what I'll do. I have so many lemons going to waste in my backyard. All that vitamin C. Since my husband died. Nobody to take care of the tree, and lemons lying on the ground. . . ." A big, a very big and long sigh flowed out of her.

"I know what we'll do with your lemons," said the old lady brightly. "We'll pass them on to Mrs. Floyd on the corner. She'd like them, wouldn't she, Gus? We'll tell her they're from . . ."

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"Doris. I just couldn't stand seeing them go to waste."

"Sure," Gus said. "It was nice of you to drop by, Doris. We'll take good care of your lemons."

"Doris," she repeated. "Thirty-two years I was married. My husband's name was Gene. A mean guy, through and through. And one day for no reason he says, that's it, I'm sick of that old thing, all that mess in the yard, and he goes out there to the lemon tree and starts chopping away at the trunk."

Now she had their attention.

"I damn near took his head off," Doris said. "Luckily, they thought he fell on his axe."

Then she was free, running down the slick street through a heavy shower, past the garbage bags that crouched in pools in front of each house, water streaming off their deep black plastic, thick and viscous-looking as blood. Well, her lemons wouldn't be out there. She lingered on her front porch a long time, even though she was shivering, thinking Gus sure could use a new hat. The lights at their house had gone out; the street was peaceful. She had gotten away with it, said what had to be said, and they hadn't believed her, had they, or the police would be here by now.

At ten, Doris peeked out to the backyard through the curtains. She couldn't really see the lemon tree. But she could cry, so she did, standing at the kitchen sink, gripping the side, bawling about something or other for a long time, until she was all tired out and went to bed.

And out in the backyard, all night long, the fragrance of lemons suffused the mist, and the leaves of the lemon tree trembled joyfully under the cool droplets of water. ●

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The Machine of Justice

by Gerry Maddren

When Antoine came back from the storage room, which was often referred to as "the widow's house," he went directly to the desk in his library and pushed aside the day's copy of *La Presse* with its account of Paul Gauguin's death. Then, unlocking a drawer, he took out an old revolver, loaded it with gunpowder, and pressed it against the side of his head. Had he not heard Germaine's footsteps in the very next moment he would most certainly have pulled the trigger. Quickly he slipped the weapon behind the red velvet cushion resting on the sofa and set himself down with his back firmly against it. An instant later Germaine, dressed in a charming rose-colored gown, was standing before him.

"Smile," she commanded sweetly, pushing the sides of his mouth upwards with her warm fingers before she kissed him lightly, adjusted her long skirt, and sat down beside him. "Where is that old sparkle in your eyes, *mon amour?* The robust laughter that used to fill my ears?"

"Gone." Antoine sighed. "Gone with my hopes and aspirations."

The delicate brown eyebrows came near touching each other in a frown. "But only two years ago, when you succeeded your father as chief executioner, you said the dream you'd carried with you since you were a boy had at last come true."

A native Californian and a mother of seven, Gerry Maddren spends most of her time these days writing mysteries. Her first novel, *The Case of the Johannesburg Riesling,* was published by Cliffhanger Press in 1988, and she has recently had the thrill of seeing her second, as yet unpublished, book optioned for film. Ms. Maddren's short fiction can also be found in the anthology *WomanSleuth.*

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Antoine shook his head. "Only half the dream. For I have no clients. Not one in all these months." He could see that his lovely Germaine didn't understand and he took her hands in his. "I feel like an artist who's commissioned to paint a picture and then denied the use of paints or brushes."

"It's just as well, my love. You are not cruel enough for your father's and grandfather's profession."

"The guillotine, as I've told you at least a half-dozen times before, isn't cruel. It's far more humane than the old way of hanging. The blade falls, and the execution is over as quick as that." Antoine struck one hand against the other to demonstrate. "There is no pain, and it's certainly far kinder than the fate of the American President McKinley's assassin. It is a matter of record that it took his executioners a great many attempts to electrocute him, for their new apparatus didn't work very well."

Germaine shrugged coquettishly. "I guess you should know, since for many decades it's been your family's business." And there, as the space between them lessened and their mouths met, the conversation ended.

He went out to the storage barn again that afternoon, this time in the company of his uncle Bardot, who looked, certainly not for the first time, at Antoine's machine of justice and shook his head.

"They make you paint it brown now, instead of red. And decree that you install shock absorbers to silence the sound of the blade. It's not like the old days."

"A long way from the old days," Antoine agreed. "I remember grandfather telling me twenty-six members of the Cadoudal plot against Napoleon lost their heads in twenty-seven minutes."

"And later on the Cooks Travel Company ran special tours that would always include a guillotining." Uncle Bardot gestured broadly as though he were lecturing to an audience. "People brought their children. They held parties afterwards and women wore symbolic red ribbons tied around their necks."

"Yes." Antoine could not help admiring the fine lines of his machine of justice. "I've studied the history from its beginning in seventeen ninety-two. The executioner was greatly respected, almost an equal with the head of state. But we've had no executions ordered for too many years now. I'm not greeted on the streets or in the fine houses so ardently. The family name is all

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but forgotten. Even our footman, Tussard, has confessed he suffers a certain backlash from his master's loss of prestige."

"It's the tenor of the present times, I'm afraid." Uncle Bardot frowned. "Suddenly there's this strange wave of sympathy for the criminal, what you might call an upside-down view of justice. Something should be done about it. Perhaps we should talk more about it over a glass of wine?"

Again Antoine shut and locked the door to the storage barn and uncle and nephew went back to the library and opened a bottle of wine from Bordeaux. So low were Antoine's spirits and so delightful the wine that he drank more than usual and finally fell asleep on the sofa, where he lost all memory of the evening and woke with a splitting head.

In the distance he heard the repetitive shout of a newsboy . . . "Two murders. Two brutal murders near the Boulevard Henri IV." Antoine felt certain he was dreaming, yet his eyes were open. He rose unsteadily from the sofa and made his way down the hall in search of the kitchenmaid, who would make him some hot coffee.

"It makes a chill go down one's spine," the kitchen maid said as she poured coffee and then hot milk into his cup. "The newsboy said tomorrow's paper will have all the details."

Whether from the coffee or the news, his head felt better and he thought he would bathe and dress and be ready for a drive to the Bois de Boulogne when Germaine arrived. It was only when he was adjusting his cravat that he remembered the pistol in the library behind the pillow. It was loaded and should one of the maids come across it . . . He hurried to the library and looked behind every pillow, but the gun was gone. Fearing that one of the help might mishandle the weapon and become injured, he was heading for the kitchen when there was an imperative knock on the door. The footman, hustling his arms into his black and red jacket, quickly appeared and soon returned with the news that the Director of Police, Monsieur Georges Fantour, was waiting in the reception room. Antoine went straightaway to see him.

The Director's gray eyes fastened on Antoine as soon as he entered the room. "Sit down," he recommended. "I have a piece of news that I believe requires it." Antoine lowered himself into an armchair like an obedient schoolboy.

"There were two murders last night."

"Yes, I . . ." Fantour's look made Antoine break off his intended sentence.

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"The weapon, a rather old pistol, was found near the corpse. But that was not all. This little bracelet was found as well." The Director displayed the underside of the bracelet, which was inscribed *From Antoine to Germaine, With Love.*

"I will have to question Germaine."

"But you can't think that . . ." Antoine told himself it was all a part of his wine-induced dream until Fantour returned with Germaine by his side. His words, "We have a confession," seemed to strike Antoine with some sort of paralysis and he could neither move nor speak.

The trial, because of Germaine's repeated confession, took little time. She was sentenced to death, and Antoine received the contract for the execution. With breaking heart he dragged himself to the prison to give Germaine the *toilette du condamné.* His hands shook and he could hardly hold the scissors that he had to use to cut her beautiful hair short enough . . . short enough so that the guillotine's blade would fall to its deadly conclusion without the slightest interference.

Early the next morning before sunup the horse-drawn wagon bearing his guillotine made its way to the Boulevard Arago and was set up in front of the wall of the Sante Prison. And even at this hour there was an eager crowd on hand to watch as the wicker basket and the bucket half-filled with bran were put in place. Mounted guards posed with their sabers drawn. Germaine, pale and shorn, but still lovely, followed a priest to the fatal platform. Antoine's throat constricted so that the words his heart wanted to say wouldn't come out. He could only watch mutely as his top-hatted assistants secured her slender arms and strapped her to a plank. Then the plank was lowered to a horizontal position and moved forward until Germaine's slender neck lay between the upright bars that supported the well-sharpened blade.

"Do not fret, *mon amour,"* she whispered as Antoine's trembling hands touched the sides of her head. "You said there was no pain."

His face lowered until his cheek, wet with tears, touched hers. "I can't do it."

"You must, for it is my precious gift to you to show my eternal love. You must. You must." His hands moved as though they were not his own, making certain her neck was in the lunette. His ears

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filled with thunder, thunder so loud he never heard the blade fall. But his eyes saw her shorn head roll into the basket.

Once more the men he passed took their hats off to him. The women smiled and curtsied. He was given his seating preference at the opera, the theater, the Moulin Rouge, and the Folies Bergère. All carriages politely fell behind his on the Champs Élysées or along the roads of the Bois de Boulogne. Uncle Bardot was given free drinks at any bar in Paris and Antoine's footman, Tussard, enjoyed unheard of success with ladies' maids and even with some ladies.

Then there was an unsolved murder in May, another in October, and a third in November, when Director Fantour called on Antoine again. He refused an apéritif but accepted the comfortable-looking chair Antoine offered.

"A few days ago a gentleman left a pair of costly boots with a shoemaker's assistant on the rue St. Honore," he began, "left them with instructions that they were to be cleaned and stretched a bit to more comfortably accommodate his toes. It appeared to be a routine request, wouldn't you say?" Antoine could do little more than nod.

"But when the shoemaker saw the boots he recognized them, for he had made them himself, and he immediately looked up his records. Yes, he had made the boots for a Monsieur Bardot Beringer, who he had heard had died last August." Fantour leaned forward, brows raised as though waiting for confirmation.

"On August twelfth my uncle died of what the doctor called acute alcoholism."

"Aha. And there were also red stains on the shoes. The two things together the shoemaker thought suspicious so he brought the boots to us. And thanks to new techniques it was determined that the stains were human blood.

"Also the soles . . ." Fantour smiled malevolently, ". . . matched prints we'd taken from one of the murder scenes. Perhaps I will accept your offer of an apéritif after all. But make it two please, for there's someone I've brought to see you." With that he went to the door and, with a feeling of confusion, Antoine pulled the bell cord to summon his footman and order the drinks.

"This is Monsieur Lubec," Fantour said when he'd returned, "the shoemaker I told you about." Antoine nodded at the little man whose narrowed eyes were focused on him and absently

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accepted, as the other two had done, a glass from the silver tray in Tussard's hands.

"That's him," the nervous little man whispered to Fantour, "the one who brought in the shoes."

"Well, well, Antoine," Fantour's smile broadened, "I never would have thought . . ."

"No, no!" the shoemaker insisted. "Not him. The other one, the stout one that served us our apéritifs."

The footman bragged, rather than confessed, that he'd carried off all five murders, and was informed that he was under arrest and would be taken off to jail. He asked, however, to be allowed to bid goodbye to his master. He was allotted three minutes to do so, during which time he told Antoine he'd been a good master and suggested he go to his room in the servants' quarters. "There's a note there that was given to me some time ago," he told Antoine. "A note Mademoiselle Germaine asked me to deliver immediately after her execution. There's also, in my third drawer, among a few trinkets I took from the bodies, a nice-looking bracelet you're welcome to take in return for the conveniently inscribed bracelet I stole from her some time ago." He was smiling when Fantour's men led him away, as though looking forward to the considerable, though brief, notoriety he would soon enjoy.

Antoine's fingers shook as he opened the envelope, for he recognized Germaine's slanting script: "Antoine, my dearest, I go to God innocent. Even for your love I would not be able to take another's life. But confess I can, for that is a small price to pay if it brings your life meaning and lasting happiness."

The next morning Antoine had his guillotine loaded into a covered horse cart which he then drove to Cherbourg. There he hired a boat to ferry it across the Channel. Since rough weather often plagued that particular crossing, and there was an inevitable pitching of waves, it did not seem unduly surprising when it was reported that the guillotine rolled overboard and sank en route.

Antoine, the executioner, never returned to Paris. Some said, after the boat finally docked in Weymouth, that he departed with the other passengers and then went on to London or to the more sanguine climate of Italy. But it seemed much more likely to those who knew him best that he lay on the Channel floor beside his machine of justice. ●

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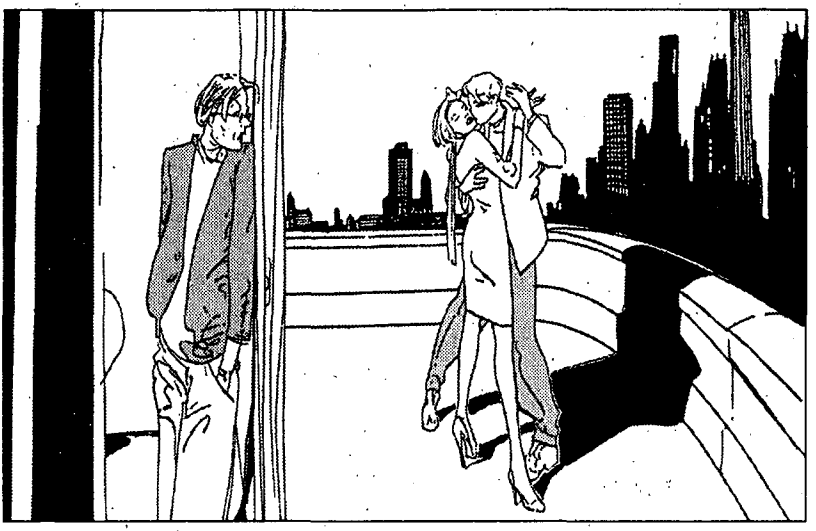

Art by Istvan Banyai

THE PRICE OF THE MIDNIGHT DANCING

by William Bankier

I looked out the window and there was Denny Pelt. No mistaking the grizzly-bear physique, the scruffy head that reminded me of a fence post pounded shaggy with a sledgehammer.

The last time I saw Denny was in Marko's Studio in Montreal. There, he had been dressed conservatively in white shirt and paisley tie. Here in Malibu, he was wearing a crimson tank top and baggy black shorts. I turned the crank so that my window swiveled open, spilling out some of my expensively conditioned air. "Yo, Pelt!"

He had been studying the beach house as if he was about to make an offer. My bellow interrupted that train of thought. He

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bent his knees and raised both hands, palms forward, to frame a startled face. "Is that you, Carl Seymour?"

"Come up those steps," I commanded, indicating the jointed wooden stairway that looked more rickety than it was. Pelt began picking his way and soon we were together in my living room with the beach visible below a wall of glass, and the Pacific Ocean sending in three lazy waves per minute.

"I was going to write or telephone," Denny said, "but I was afraid you'd disappear." He pointed an accusing finger at me. In the recording studio, with me in charge, he had been the gentle giant who always delivered the goods on the final take. Today, he seemed slightly out of control.

In the summer of 1995, Mosaic Press, a Canadian publisher of mystery fiction, released a book that fans of Bill Bankier's short stories will find a treat. The book takes its title, *Fear Is a Killer,* from the *EQMM* story of that name which leads the collection; most of the other tales included are also stories first published in this magazine. Canadian by birth, Mr. Bankier sets most of his stories in Canada, though sometimes the scene shifts to his current home in L.A. †

Still, there was nothing to do but offer my old colleague a drink. He said yes to cold beer. "How long has it been?" His back was to me as he stared at the horizon, looking for signs of the Japanese fleet. The beer went down quickly.

"Seventeen years." My mind slipped back to the series of evenings we had spent together, Denny and myself, and our wives. The four of us would be at his place in NDG, or sometimes at my house in Côte St. Luc. There was always music. Whose idea was it to dance? My wife, Jan, did not move well with Denny. They turned awkwardly in front of the bookshelves and the fireplace. But Pelt's wife was made for my embrace.

"Where's Clarice?" I asked him now.

His response could have been a joke, but I sensed it was menacing. "That's for me to know," Denny said, "and you to find out."

Denny's rental car was a nasty-looking black roadster, flat as a turtle and with murky windows. We drove south in it, on Pacific

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Coast Highway, to Gladstone's, where we ate the catch of the day. Which day and caught where, nobody would ever know. The ocean watched us eat. I was accustomed to its company after so much time in California. My companion, just arrived from Montreal, kept stealing nervous glances out the window. The Pacific was always there, like an open door. We had come from salt water eons ago, and now it was waiting to take us back.

"Can you talk about Jan?" he said when the coffee came.

"It's been seven years. I thought I'd never get over it. But one does."

Denny sat there. Jan's murder had been reported back in Montreal. I knew that through letters that came from friends. He was waiting for the first-hand account.

"She went to the bank to get cash out of the ATM. We were living in Van Nuys then, not here. This guy came up behind her and grabbed the money. She held on and he stabbed her in the chest. She was dead before the paramedics got there."

"They caught the killer."

"The fool lived about three blocks up the street. The ATM camera took pictures of him. Everybody knew him."

"And he's in prison."

"Right." I had been over this many times in my mind. "It isn't fair. Jan lived an exemplary life. She touched countless people and made everybody feel better. The guy who killed her was like a rotten branch on a tree. No good to anybody. But look how it played out. She's in the ground, wasted at age thirty-three. He's got his rent paid for life, all his meals, a place to work out, people to talk to, books if he wants. He'll probably live to be seventy-five —a far better life than he would have had otherwise."

"What about remorse? The agony of the soul."

"Do you believe that organism ever sensed anything but satisfaction at being able to unload his anger? The branch fell from the tree and killed my dear, sweet Janice." My heart had not pounded this hard in a year. I suppose it was good for me. "You or I, Denny Pelt. If we killed somebody, we'd experience remorse."

He laughed silently at that. Then, finishing his coffee, he said, "I have an audiotape I want you to hear. Can we go back to your place?"

It was dark when we drove back to Malibu. As swarms of headlights raced towards us and flashed past, fearing for my life, I hid behind conversation. "Why are you here, Denny? Is this a holiday?"

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"How about I'm looking for work?"

"You've got the voice. There's radio here, TV voice-overs. You'll need a green card."

This practicality did not interest him. "Remember that first audition? You were in the control room, wearing your fifty-dollar striped shirt. I knew nothing about you, only that you were the man. Something about the way you said, 'Any time you're ready!' really ticked me off. I figured I never wanted to work for this pompous jerk. My jitters vanished, I ate that script up. Next thing I knew, I had the contract."

"Start of a brilliant career."

The beach house came up on the left. Denny pulled in and switched off. As if we'd rehearsed it, neither of us opened a door. We sat there, looking at the plank deck, floodlit from two sides. We were waiting for key lines that remained to be said.

"Would you hire me again?"

"I'm not in the business now. You know that." I was linked up with an artist, writing cute verses for children. They were moral couplets made palatable by her brilliant illustrations. There was not much money in it. But Jan's insurance had set me up with an annuity. "If you're serious, I can put you on to a couple of people."

"You never understood, did you?"

"What?"

"How much I hated having to kiss the hem of your garment."

"It was never like that."

"You'd say, 'Great job, Denny!' And I knew it was just a passable job, I could do lots better. It took me awhile to figure out what you were up to."

"You've lost me." I was trapped with this giant drunk who seemed to have some sort of grievance against me. It was not a good feeling. Did he expect to spend the night?

Denny gripped the wheel in both hands, pushing against it and then pulling it as if he was about to rip it from the steering column. "I was split. I wanted to tell you to take your praise and stuff it. But I was used to getting those checks in the mail. If I quit, Clarice would have gone nuts." He put on a high voice. "'What have you done, Denny? What will we do now?'"

"Let's go inside." My shirt had gone clammy against my chest.

Pelt opened the glove compartment and took out a tape cassette. "When I think you're ready, we can listen to this."

"It's an experimental thing," he said as the cassette spindles

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revolved slowly in my stereo tape deck. Fog was creeping in off the ocean, coating the dark windows with condensation. When my visitor shivered in his scanty tank top, I brought out an Acapulco poncho and draped it over his shoulders. Then I touched a match to stacked kindling in the fireplace and when it flashed up, I slung on a couple of pine slabs.

The tape was still winding in. "You don't have to audition for me."

"Just listen. I've done something different."

Theme music played—the cool tumble of the electric piano that was popular in the seventies. Then the voice of Denny Pelt selling the passenger services of Canadian National Railways. "Yes, Kubla Khan himself would relax in the stately pleasure dome of a CN train as it rolls through the heart-stopping grandeur of the Rocky Mountains . . ."

I said, "This is old stuff."

Pelt winked. "Keep listening."

The commercial stopped abruptly. A few seconds of dead tape, then voices. A man and a woman. It was Denny himself and he was arguing with his wife, Clarice.

"Why bring this up after all these years?" she said.

"Better late than never."

"There was never anything between me and Carl. I'm sick of saying it. He moved to California. We get a Christmas card." Her voice sharpened. "Leave me alone!"

"The way you two danced together. I can't get it out of my mind."

"You danced with Jan."

"Sister and brother. But not you two. You were socking it in. And then you went outside on the porch."

"And you embarrassed everybody, the way you yelled our names. Like kids, like you were calling us in."

"I did all I could to forget about it. I tried to bury that picture in my mind. It keeps coming back."

"Then I pity you."

"He had me. The bastard owned me because he hired me for jobs. You have no idea how that can eat a man's guts."

"If you can't be mature enough . . ."

"So I've decided what to do. To set myself free. First I kill you. Then I head for Los Angeles, and I kill him."

"I won't listen to this."

"After that, I'll decide what to do with myself. Live or die."

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She began to scream. It was terminated, replaced by choking sounds. I got up and hit the Off button. "What is this, Denny?"

"It's what you heard."

"You murdered Clarice?"

"What did it sound like?"

"I think we need to play this for the police." I went to pick up the telephone. For a man his size, Denny Pelt moved very quickly. He reached the phone first. He did not rip it from the wall. He just prevented me from picking it up, using one hand to hold off my feeble struggles. He began laughing at me.

I turned away. My heart was racing. I was afraid I was about to die, badly. "Let's talk about this."

"Okay, I'll give you five minutes." Pelt sat back in his chair by the fire.

I took a brass poker and began stirring the embers till they flared up. "There was never anything between me and Clarice."

"That's what she said."

I left the hearth, moved around behind his chair. I held the poker behind my back. "I liked her, but an affair was not my style. I was always faithful to Jan."

"Are you pleading with me, Carl? I hate that."

It was now or never. His mocking tone was the trigger. I swung hard and brought the poker against the side of his head, above the ear. He slumped sideways in the chair. Now I was really afraid. What if he recovered from the blow and came at me? He would hurt me, maybe kill me. I swung again and again, crushing his skull.

When he pitched forward onto the floor, I stopped swinging. Without touching the battered figure, I could tell he was dead. There was no calling the police now. Even if I played the tape for them, it would not justify my action.

Killing is hardly ever necessary. Most murders are pure self-indulgence.

Floodlights gleamed on the black car parked outside the house. There it was, a way to get rid of the body. And who knew Pelt was here? Nobody, as far as I could tell. It seemed clear. He had murdered his wife in Montreal because of a festering grievance buried in his mind over a decade ago. Now he had flown to California to finish the job. If the car was gone and he was gone, and if I got rid of my bloody hearthrug and did some further cleaning up, who would ever know Denny Pelt had been here?

First, the bloodstained poncho had to come off. Then, I found the car keys in a pocket of his shorts. Next, I managed to get him off

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the floor in a fireman's lift. When we were on the porch, hidden in the sea fog, I took the easy way. I dropped him over the railing onto the gravel yard.

Then I moved the car, bringing it to rest with the passenger door beside the body. Five minutes later he was in the passenger seat, head back and eyes closed, like any other California drunk.

The fog was a blessing. Traffic on the coast highway was almost nonexistent. And the impending accident would seem understandable with a tourist at the wheel.

I remembered the audio cassette, ran inside and got it, hurried back and opened the glove compartment. Along with registration, rental-agency paperwork, and a roll of mints, there was a folded sheaf of typewritten pages inside. On the chance Denny had written some sort of letter with my name in it, I pocketed the papers. Then I got behind the wheel and rolled off my property.

I knew the exact bend in the road where the accident would take place. When I reached it, I pulled the car onto the shoulder and left it idling. The road was well above the ocean at this point; I could hear breakers hitting the rocks in the dark, below.

With the transmission in neutral, I stepped out, reached back inside, and managed to drag Denny's body behind the wheel. The engine raced as I jammed his right foot against the accelerator. Next, I cranked the window open and slammed the door. Finally, I was able to reach inside and past him to slide the shift handle into Drive. The steering wheel was already turned towards the cliff.

I had to leap back as the car raced ahead. It crossed the highway and the far shoulder in seconds. Then it soared gracefully into space and dived out of sight. Moments later, I heard the impact, followed by a dull explosion as gasoline caught fire.

I was home again in less than an hour. It surprised me that I felt good, my circulation stimulated by the energetic walk.

The typewritten pages were on my mind. I was curious. I perched on one of the high stools by the kitchen divider and read the text by the light of a brass lamp. It was a script of sorts. In the film business, they call it a "treatment"—more than a plot outline but less than a finished script. There was a title page: "Bad Actors" by Denholm Pelt. At this late date, I had discovered Denny's proper name.

The story dealt with a marriage gone bad. The protagonist worked for a large company. He and his wife met socially on a regular basis with the employer and his wife. The relationship became too close for comfort. There was an attempt at wife-swap-

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ping that turned sour. And here came a page of sample dialogue.

CLARICE: "Why bring this up after all these years?"

DENNY: "Better late than never."

CLARICE: "There was never anything between me and Carl."

It went on. It was the argument I had heard on the tape. Did that mean the tape had been a test? Was it a rehearsal of a portion of Pelt's movie scenario? I had to find out. I located the address book I had brought with me from Montreal. In it was Pelt's old telephone number. I dialed it now in the middle of the night, afraid the ringing might wake the dead.

Clarice answered, sounding sleepy. "Who is this?"

"It's me. Carl Seymour."

She woke up. "Carl! Where are you?"

"In Los Angeles." I had to be careful. "Denny was here."

"That's a surprise."

"Didn't you know?"

"We don't communicate much these days."

"He had a tape with him. Forgive me, it sounded like he was murdering you."

"Did he play you that thing? He must have been drunk."

"He was."

"Denny was writing a script. He had us record some of it to hear how the dialogue sounded."

We talked on. After a while she told me the call was costing me a fortune. By this time I was more sure of myself. I felt I could level with her. "Clarice, I did a bad thing. Denny turned aggressive on me. You know how he gets. I got scared. I hit him with a poker, I had to. He's dead." I went on to describe getting rid of the body.

She was quiet for some time. Then she said, "There hasn't been anything between us for years. I'm sorry he's dead. But you're not in any trouble with me."

"Maybe with the police, after they investigate the wreck."

She had an answer for that. "So why don't you not be there when it happened?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Why don't you think up a good reason to be in Montreal?"

I telephoned Air Canada and booked myself on their earliest flight. Then, as I packed a bag, I invented a story to cover my absence from the beach house on the previous evening. I would

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say I was in Beverly Hills attending a late screening of a couple of art films. Not wanting to drive all the way up to Malibu, then back to LAX for my early morning flight, I checked in at a motel. This explained why I was not at home when my old friend showed up. He must have gone drinking somewhere, then missed the turn in the fog on the unfamiliar road.

The drive down Pacific Coast Highway took very little time. In the El Segundo area, not far from the airport, I registered at a motel. It was after two o'clock, but if the police checked the time, I would say I had dined late and done a bit of club hopping.

I left a wake-up call at the motel office and then tried to sleep. My thoughts were racing. Denny was right. Back in the days of the midnight dancing, I had felt attracted to his wife. But he let us know he was aware of it, and that he would not put up with it. So I backed off and nothing happened. Now, years later, he had come after me. I slept poorly, rigid with anxiety.

I slept better after the airplane took off. I arrived at Mirabel somewhat rested and took the limo downtown to a major hotel. I checked in, then telephoned Clarice Pelt. "I'm here. I'm in room ten seventeen at the Bonaventure."

"You sound awful."

"That's how I feel."

"You don't know what a real problem is." Her impatience was probably the best thing for me. "Denny's the one who's dead. Come alive, Carl."

"And I haven't slept much."

"I'll be there soon."

I put down the telephone and stood looking at myself in a full-length mirror. My suit was wrinkled. I was thin. My posture was round-shouldered, the inward curve of a defeated man. This evolution could not have occurred in a day and a night. The long flight back to Montreal had been taken to educate me, to demonstrate an important discovery. I was growing old.

I could not go to bed with Pelt's widow. The prospect suddenly made my flesh creep. She had been a delicious little creature all those years ago. But I had been primed on wine and music and we had resisted the temptation then. Now I was tired and wasted and I had recently committed a murder. It had been a mistake even to accept the invitation to come here.

But it was not too late to run away. I took my bag and the key and left room ten seventeen. I hurried to the elevator and pressed Down, terrified that Clarice would step out when the door opened.

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She was not that fast. I had the car to myself on the way to the lobby. I found a concession counter, bought some gum and a newspaper. My intention was to walk up to the Rymark on Peel Street, have a beer and a plate of ham and beans, try to stabilize myself. I might or might not contact Clarice again when my mind was settled.

The police came in from the street moving purposefully.

One of them went to the desk and had a word with a clerk. A bellman was given a key and led the way to the elevator. The party got in and headed up. I was able to see the floor indicator. It stopped at ten.

What a devious character she was! Clarice had never intended to get together with me. When she heard my story on the telephone from California, her mind must have worked fast. She decided to lure me back to Montreal. When and if I showed up, she would send the cops to arrest me. How neat! No pursuit, just the guilty man walking blind-eyed into the trap.

I decided to go on to the tavern. The police would have no reason to look for me there. Now I had something concrete on my mind. It was a relief after the free-floating anxiety of the past eighteen hours. I had to avoid arrest.

And there was something else. It came to me as I walked along Dorchester Boulevard towards Peel Street. Perhaps I should also consider taking care of the treacherous Clarice Pelt.

There were plenty of empty tables at the Rymark. I ordered three drafts and the ham and beans. The noble tavern had not changed. The beer was cold, the food delicious, the grim-faced waiters fast on their feet.

What to do about Clarice? My first priority was my own safety. The police had my name. But how much did they know about the death of Denny Pelt? His wife might have reported the event in California without offering my address. I was not sure she knew it.

I finished my meal and, fortified by the beer, I called her from one of the telephones by the tavern door. "Did your cops get back to you?"

"Carl! Where are you?"

"We really have to talk now."

"Come over. I'm alone."

"Why did you set me up, Clarice?"

"It isn't what you think."

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"Here's what we'll do. I'll meet you on the mountain at Beaver Lake. In an hour. Come alone. I'll be in a position where I can see you arrive. If there's any sign of police surveillance, I'll be gone."

I put down the telephone. Then I hefted my bag, went outside, and hailed a taxi, like any other tourist. We headed up Côte des Neiges. There were a couple of families picnicking on the grass by the lake. I stowed my luggage under a bench inside the pavillion and went outside to take up a place on the hillside, among trees. I had a clear view of the grassy slope below.

Some time later, Clarice arrived alone, walking from the direction of the road. She had lost weight, a tiny figure no taller than a schoolchild. Her jeans were pale blue. A silky red blouse flowed loose at the waist.

I had to dig in my heels to keep my progress down the slope from becoming a sprint. "I'm here, Clarice!"

She turned and squinted up into the sunlight, knuckles grasping the bill of a large tweed cap. "Carl! Oh, Carl!"

It was correct to take her in my arms, despite what I had done to her husband. And what she had tried to do to me. She was all bones—not my zoftig dancing partner. She sensed my disappointment.

"I've been sick." It was an apology.

"What's wrong?"

"I've had radiation therapy. Now they're trying chemo." She took off the cap to show me her bald head. "They tell me I have a chance. They always say that, true or not. I've decided to believe them."

"Of course." I took both her hands.

"Don't look so sad. It really makes you appreciate life more. I'm having such precious days. And now here you are, from out of the past." She pulled the cap back on. "You have to tell me about Denny."

We walked to the pavilion. We ordered hot chocolate and brought it to a table by a window with a view of the lake. I described again Denny's surprise arrival in Malibu and his threatening behavior which led to my assault with the poker. "I never intended to kill him. But once he was dead, I had to fake the accident."

"I believe you. He became very weird the last couple of years. I guess he couldn't help it. We separated. I kept the house, he was living in the Old Town. He tried coming back when I was diagnosed with cancer. But it didn't help, I had to ask him to leave."

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She was enjoying the chocolate drink. "I'm not surprised he turned on you."

"Why did you send the cops to the hotel room?"

"I was afraid of you. Your telephone call from L.A. was shocking. Then suddenly, you were here. I know I invited you, but I never thought you'd come. I just need things to remain peaceful." She turned her head away and smiled out the window. "I'm not sure I wanted you to see me."

Later, she said it was time for her to go home. She asked me to come with her. I picked up my bag and we walked back to the parking lot where there were cabs waiting. We got in and she gave her address.

I said, "May I stay and take care of you?"

"You could try."

"Do you believe life is a script?"

"For a lot of people, it's a horror story."

"I mean us. Bad things happening, but good people together at the end."

"The end is something we can't predict, Carl. You have to take what comes, when it comes."

We were moving along familiar streets in NDG, pulling up in front of a frame cottage with a lawn that needed watering. "One last time, Clarice. I killed your husband. Could you live with that? Can you forgive me for doing it?"

"It's not my job to forgive you."

"You seem so neutral. I'm not getting any playback."

She said nothing. She was staring at the front door of the cottage. It opened and three men hurried out. Two were in uniform. They approached the taxi. I sat, powerless, staring at Clarice's enigmatic face. With all the misery she was having to endure — what life had done to her, what I had done — I was impressed by the way she contained her anger.

I was told to get out of the car and I did. As one of the officers handcuffed me, Clarice came and looked me in the eye. "Remember when we'd been dancing and we went outside and Denny yelled at us to come back in? You should have answered him. When you said nothing, I knew you were not a man."

As she walked away towards the cottage, I felt a sense of profound shame. Whatever lay ahead, I would experience nothing more painful than this. A jury would convict me for what I had done. The dying woman had punished me for what I am. ●

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The Theft of the Bogus Bandit

by Edward D. Hoch

Nick Velvet's latest caper comes close to marking a thirtieth anniversary for the lovable sleuth, for he debuted in this magazine in September of 1966. With seventy-odd adventures behind him, Velvet remains true to his pledge to steal only objects of no value. Small wonder that he takes offense when a bogus bandit commits violent armed robberies and lays the blame on him.

The young man was tall, slender, and well dressed, wearing a camel's-hair coat and a sporty checked cap against the brisk March wind. There was no reason for Roscoe Balderstone to deny him entrance when he pressed the buzzer next to the door of Charisma Isis Jewelry on upper Madison Avenue. He was tending to other customers at the time, and paid little attention to the newcomer at first. Instead he removed a glittering diamond necklace from the display case and held it up to the light for a young woman and her older male companion to see. He knew this would be a sale. The luxury hotel across the street often provided customers eager to cap a perfect evening with a little remembrance the following morning.

"What do you think, honey?" the man asked. He was graying, paunchy, and easily twenty years older than his blond companion, but neither of them seemed to mind that. He took the necklace from the jeweler's hand and held it out to her.

"It's lovely, but you shouldn't—"

"Nonsense! What's money for, if not to spend."

The new arrival, standing some distance away, lifted his

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checked cap and pulled something black down over his eyes. Roscoe Balderstone turned to look directly at him for the first time and saw that a mask now covered the upper half of his face. "What's this?" he asked.

The masked man smiled. His hand came out of his coat pocket holding a 9-mm. pistol like those the police carried. "Don't any of you move. I want that necklace," he said quietly.

"Who are you?" Balderstone asked, stalling for time while his right foot searched for the silent alarm button.

"No tricks!" the masked man said, raising his voice. "No alarms!"

The little jeweler moved quickly then, reaching the alarm with his foot. The masked man raised the pistol slightly and shot him in the chest.

The young woman screamed and clutched at the counter. The jeweler was on the floor, bleeding. The gunman stepped forward and snatched the necklace from the woman's hand, then backed toward the door while still covering them both.

"Perhaps we'll meet again," he told the woman with a smile. "My name is Velvet. Nick Velvet."

At the comfortable, middle-class house in Westchester County where he'd lived most of his life with Gloria, Nick Velvet was enjoying his noonday beer while he read through the day's mail. He wasn't prepared for the police car that coasted silently to a stop out in front, nor the two officers who approached the door with hands on their holstered guns.

When Nick answered the door the older of the two said, "Mr. Velvet? We'd like you to come along with us, please."

"What for?" Nick asked blankly.

Gloria had heard the bell and come downstairs. "Nicky, who is it?"

"The police, ma'am," the officer replied. "It's just a routine matter."

"What sort of routine matter?" Nick asked.

"We'd like you to accompany us for questioning."

Nick tried to imagine what might be on their minds. It had been months since he'd had an assignment anywhere in the New York area. "What's this about?"

"A jewelry store in Manhattan was robbed this morning by a masked gunman. He used your name."

"He's been right here all morning!" Gloria insisted.

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"It's just routine," the officer repeated, "but they want to question you."

"Nicky—"

"It's all right, Gloria."

"I'm going with you. I'll follow in our car."

Two New York City detectives were waiting to question Nick at his suburban police station. The one who did the talking was a stocky Irishman named Sergeant Monaghan. He made Gloria sit outside while he paced the floor, asking Nick some routine questions before getting down to business. "You're a thief, aren't you?"

"I've never stolen anything of value."

"There's some debate about that. You've been locked up a couple of times."

"Misunderstandings. People like to accuse me of things I didn't do."

"You were at home all morning?"

"I was. Gloria will testify to that."

"Gloria is your wife?"

"It's a common-law marriage."

Monaghan gave a little snort and made a note on his pad. "We'd like to take you down to Manhattan for a lineup, Mr. Velvet."

"Not without a lawyer, you won't! Suppose you tell me about this jewelry store I'm supposed to have robbed."

"A man and woman were examining a diamond necklace when the thief entered. He slipped a mask over his face and took out a gun. When the owner of the store, a man named Balderstone, tried to reach the alarm, he was shot in the chest and the necklace was grabbed from his hand. He's in surgery right now."

"If you know anything about me, you know that I wouldn't pull off a robbery like that."

"We'd just like the two witnesses to see you."

Certain he had nothing to fear, Nick told Gloria to phone a lawyer named Jerry Margolin whom he occasionally consulted. Then he agreed to the trip into Manhattan. It was hours later, almost evening, before the lineup was finally arranged. He was given a cap and mask to wear, and stood on a small stage with four other men of about the same build.

"All right," the detective told them. "I want each of you in turn to say, 'My name is Velvet. Nick Velvet.' "

They did as they were told, facing a two-way mirror. Nick was the second one to speak. After a moment they were asked to

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repeat the phrase. Finally Sergeant Monaghan told Nick, "The witnesses can't be certain. You're off the hook for now."

"I can leave?"

"That's right."

Nick spoke to his lawyer briefly and then left with Gloria for the ride home. She was clutching an afternoon edition of one of the tabloids, the *Daily Standard,* and when they reached the car she showed it to him. "Look at this. Page three."

The headline jumped out at him: Unique Thief Turns Violent. The article, with a byline by someone named Mark Masters, began, "Long a legendary figure in crime circles for his habit of stealing valueless objects, Nick Velvet was questioned by police today following a jewelry store holdup and shooting on Madison Avenue that left one man in critical condition. Roscoe Balderstone, owner of Charisma Isis Jewelry, was shot in the chest during a robbery shortly after ten this morning. The masked gunman snatched a diamond necklace valued at nearly $100,000 from the hand of a woman customer. As he made his escape he announced that his name was Nick Velvet."

"Who is this Masters?" Nick grumbled. "That headline is libelous."

"The reporters don't usually write their own headlines, Nicky. Look at the last paragraph, though. There've been earlier robberies."

He skipped to the end of the news story and read, "The description of the gunman closely matched that of the so-called Gentleman Bandit, known to have held up two other midtown jewelry stores earlier this month. One victim told police the man who held her at gunpoint in her store mentioned the name Velvet."

"This could mean trouble for you," Gloria said.

"The police know it's not me." But he thought about it all the way home.

It wasn't until three days later that the subject came up again. The masked gunman had struck once more, again announcing himself as Nick Velvet when he stole a valuable gold choker from a shop just off Park Avenue. He'd fired a shot into the ceiling but no one had been injured.

"Nicky, you have to do something!" Gloria insisted. "You have to catch this man before he ruins your reputation!"

Nick shook his head. "I'm a robber, not a cop. I only work when

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somebody pays me, and I don't see anyone offering me twenty-five grand to find this guy."

Gloria sulked around for a bit after that, saying nothing more until they saw an update on the local news that evening. The good news was that the jeweler, Roscoe Balderstone, was out of danger and expected to recover from his chest wound. The bad news was an on-camera statement by Sergeant Monaghan that the police were continuing to investigate the activities of the real Nick Velvet.

That was too much for Gloria. She busied herself at her desk and returned in a few moments with her personal check. It was made out to Nick in the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars. "It's not your money. It's from my personal account. I'm hiring you to steal this bogus bandit who's pretending to be you. Steal him and bring him to me and the check is yours."

"Are you serious?" Nick asked.

"I certainly am! This criminal has no value to society."

"I don't usually steal people."

"You stole an entire jury once. And a baseball team! One person should be easy."

"But I don't know who he is."

"Find out," she challenged.

On Monday morning Nick took the train into Manhattan and called at the editorial office of the *Daily Standard*. Though it wasn't yet noon, the presses were already rolling out the afternoon edition. He caught the reporter Mark Masters just as he was leaving for lunch.

"You're Nick Velvet?" Masters asked, somewhat taken aback. "The real one?"

"As much as anything is real, I suppose."

The slender young reporter, sporting a goatee apparently designed to add a few years to his boyish face, reached out impulsively to grip Nick's hand. "You must give me an interview."

"I came to ask what you know about this man posing as me."

"Come in here. The conference room is free and I can tape our conversation."

They sat at one end of a long table and Mark Masters flipped on a couple of switches. "You don't mind if I tape this, do you?"

"Go ahead."

"You are Nick Velvet, the thief who has made a career of stealing only valueless objects?"

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"That's an easy way of describing me, but I don't consider myself to be a thief. I provide a service, for which I charge a finder's fee. Some people seek out rare books or paintings for clients. I procure valueless objects."

Mark Masters smiled, positioning the microphone a bit closer to Nick. "Still, you steal them, don't you?"

"I have never committed any crimes like those attributed to the so-called Gentleman Bandit. I would never steal a large amount of cash or a diamond necklace. I have never worn a mask and I have never announced my identity like some movie superhero. Most important of all, I have tried to avoid violence. I would never fire a shot except in self-defense."

"Could this man be in your employ, an assistant of sorts?"

"I usually work alone. On rare occasions I have hired people to assist me, but never to commit an actual robbery."

"What do you consider your most spectacular robbery, Mr. Velvet?"

"I don't think of them as robberies."

"Your most spectacular success, then."

"I'd rather talk about this current rash of crimes. Do the police have any leads?"

"None except you, so far as I know."

"What about those two customers at the jewelry store? Your paper didn't print their names."

The reporter shrugged. "A wealthy married man and his mistress. Despite what people think, we don't print scandal unless it's newsworthy. They'd spent the night at the hotel across the street and he was buying her a trinket for her birthday. He's from outside the city and she lives here. He's in Manhattan on business frequently."

"I could use their names."

Masters shook his head. "Sorry. Can't be done."

"Just the woman's, then."

"No can do." But his hand reached over to turn off the tape recorder. Then he asked, "If there's a story in this, will you promise me an exclusive?"

"It's done," Nick replied. He knew when a deal was necessary.

The reporter wrote a name and address on a notepad. The name was Andrea Ellis and the address was on East 65th Street. "Don't forget me," he told Nick.

The address was one of those fancy co-ops with a uniformed door-

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man and a security guard who announced everyone over the house phone from his desk in the lobby. "Tell her it's Mr. Smith," Nick said, not wanting to frighten the woman with his real name. "It's about the store's insurance claim on the stolen necklace."

Andrea Ellis was waiting at the door when he stepped off the elevator. By the time she'd recognized him, he had one foot inside the door. "You're the man from the police lineup!"

"I'm not the man who stole the necklace. You told the police that yourself."

"I said I couldn't be sure. You didn't sound like him."

Nick edged his foot a little farther into the apartment. "I'm halfway in now. You might as well invite me in the rest of the way."

She sighed and stepped back from the door. Andrea Ellis had lovely blond hair that she obviously worked hard to keep attractive. He judged her to be somewhere around thirty, though she might have been older. Her figure was still youthful and Nick couldn't help noticing the two diamond rings on her fingers. "You're this Nick Velvet person, aren't you?" Her voice was tight and frightened.

"But not the one who robbed the jewelry store. You're perfectly safe. I just want to ask a few questions."

"I have nothing to tell you." She relaxed a bit but still kept some distance between them.

"The newspaper didn't publish your name."

"My friend asked them not to. How did you find me?"

"I have my sources. But I couldn't get your friend's name."

"It was important it not be published," she said.

"Because he's married?"

"He's in the process of getting a separation, but these things take time."

"He took you down there that morning to buy you the necklace, didn't he?"

"He's always been very generous. It was a birthday gift." She was growing impatient. "Why are you asking these questions?"

"I'm trying to find the man posing as me. He's committed other robberies but this one is different in a couple of respects. The store owner was shot and almost killed, and the bandit gave my full name for the first time. He didn't choose his loot at random, though. He took the necklace you and your companion had picked out. It's possible you acted as an accomplice, choosing an expensive piece for the jeweler to remove from his case."

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"That's ridiculous! The jeweler chose it and handed it to us. I didn't tell the police that because my friend said we were just browsing. He didn't want it to seem as if we were making a purchase. But the thief didn't take it from Mr. Balderstone. He grabbed it right out of my hand!"

"You know his name."

"We'd made small purchases there before," she murmured, glancing at the rings she wore. "That was another reason for not having our names in the paper. I didn't want that gunman coming here looking for more."

"When will your friend be in the city again?"

"That's hard to say," she answered vaguely.

"I'd like to speak with him."

"There's nothing more he can tell you."

Nick saw that it was a dead end. "All right. Thanks for your time."

It had been five days since the shooting of Roscoe Balderstone, and since he was out of danger Nick decided he should have a visitor. If there was a police guard on duty, Nick saw no sign of it as he took the elevator to the fifth floor of the hospital on upper Park Avenue and walked by the room. A middle-aged woman, probably Balderstone's wife, sat by the bed talking with him. Nick lingered down the hall in a sitting area for about twenty minutes and was rewarded when the woman went out and headed for the elevator.

When she was gone he entered Balderstone's private room and swung the door partly closed. That wouldn't keep the nurses out but it afforded some degree of privacy. The wounded man's eyes were closed but he was obviously awake, moving his hands and feet beneath the blanket.

"Pardon me, Mr. Balderstone," Nick said quietly.

The eyes came open and he looked up curiously. "You another doctor?"

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better," he mumbled. "Weak."

"Mr. Balderstone, I need to know the name of the customer who was in your store at the time of the shooting."

"Customer? The one who shot me? He said Velvet after he shot me. Nick Velvet."

"No, no. I mean the man who was buying the diamond necklace for Miss Ellis." Nick glanced quickly over his shoulder, watching for a nurse.

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"Cathacarr?"

"Where does he live?"

"Garden City, out on Long Island."

He'd expected it to be farther away, but before he could ask another question the woman who'd left the room returned. "My husband seems better today, doctor," she said.

"Indeed! We'll have him back home in no time." Nick smiled and beat a hasty retreat.

As he hurried through the hospital lobby his eye caught the afternoon edition of the *Daily Standard* in a coin-operated dispenser. The headline read: "Velvet" Nicks Another Jeweler. The byline was again by Mark Masters. That very morning, as a jeweler in a fancy Fifth Avenue hotel was unlocking his door, a well-dressed man pushed him inside and drew a gun. He was wearing a black mask over his eyes, with a checked cap pulled down to meet it. The man identified himself as Nick Velvet, and when the jeweler tried to resist, he struck him in the head with the pistol. While the jeweler crouched behind the counter fearing for his life, the bandit stole several diamond tennis bracelets from a display case and escaped. Sergeant Monaghan, in charge of the investigation, was quoted as saying that Nick Velvet would be questioned again about the crimes.

Nick tried phoning Masters at the newspaper but he was gone for the day.

He sighed and decided to face the worst of it. Dialing the number of the precinct station, he asked for Sergeant Monaghan. "This is Nick Velvet," he said when he heard the familiar voice. "The paper says you'd like to talk to me again."

"I just called your home, Velvet. You'd better come in right away."

"I'll be there."

Monaghan was on the phone when Nick arrived at the same precinct station where they'd held the lineup just four days earlier. "Sit down," the big Irishman said, motioning him to a chair beside his desk. When he'd finished on the phone he turned to Nick. "We've had five jewelry store robberies in the past month, three in the last five days, all by a thief claiming to be Nick Velvet. How do you explain that?"

"I don't pretend to," Nick answered. "It should be obvious that the man is an impostor. And aren't some of these crimes outside your precinct?"

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"The first two were down here, so I get to handle them all. What do you think this guy's trying to accomplish?"

Nick shrugged. "That should be obvious. He's a jewel thief."

The detective leaned back in his chair. "You've been nosing around, haven't you? I understand you visited Andrea Ellis at her residence, and you were seen a short time ago leaving Balderstone's hospital room. Are you after this guy yourself?"

"I have an interest in the case," Nick admitted, realizing there'd been a guard at the hospital after all.

"Stay out of it. You interfere with our investigation and that's all the excuse I'll need to lock you up."

"Have you detected a pattern to his crimes yet? Do you have other stores staked out?"

Sergeant Monaghan grinned. "Now I wouldn't be likely to tell you if I did, would I? Even if you're not the actual Gentleman Bandit, you could be in league with him."

Nick could tell this man was not about to share information with him. "Am I free to go?"

"Sure. Just stay out of my way."

Nick looked up Cathacarr's name in the Nassau County phone book that covered Garden City. A woman who answered the phone said he was at the office and Nick wrote down the number she gave him. The office was a large sports catering service in Queens and Nick phoned for an appointment with the man, representing himself again as a claims adjuster for the jeweler's insurance company. "I already spoke with Miss Ellis," Nick told him.

"Did she give you my name?" Cathacarr asked, sounding displeased.

"No, I obtained it from the store records."

There was a sigh over the phone line. "Very well. When do you want to see me?"

"This afternoon, if possible."

"I leave the office at five."

It was 3:55 by Nick's watch. "I can be there in half an hour. It won't take long."

The catering service office was part of a large garage that held a score or more trucks. Nick couldn't tell if any food preparation was done on the premises, but the business looked big and very profitable. Donald Cathacarr was a tall, handsome man with graying hair, probably near fifty. "Do you have a card?" he asked Nick, trying to remember where he'd seen him before.

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"I won't try to kid you," Nick said frankly. "You may remember me from the police lineup last week. I'm Nick Velvet."

"Of course! We saw you there with the others but we couldn't identify you. The police thought you were involved."

"They may still think so. That's why I'm trying to clear my name."

Cathacarr shook his head. "I have nothing to say. I told the police what I know."

"I need some sort of lead, anything you might remember. Maybe something about his appearance."

"What do you say about a man in a mask?"

"Was any of his hair showing beneath the hat?"

"If it was I didn't notice. I guess my eyes were on the gun."

"Did he limp or lisp or anything like that?"

Cathacarr shook his head. "Nothing that I remember."

"Did you notice anything about his teeth when he smiled?"

"He didn't smile." But Cathacarr closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to recall the scene. "There was a little rash on his chin. I just remembered that."

"Nothing else?"

"Not that I can think of." He was clearly unhappy. "Look here, Velvet, all this questioning disturbs me. I hope you don't intend to speak with my wife. She knows nothing about this business."

"I won't be contacting her," Nick assured him. "Nothing will be said about you and Miss Ellis."

"Thank you."

Nick gave him his phone number. "If you remember anything else about the bandit, I'd appreciate it if you called me."

"Fine. You'll have to excuse me now. I have an appointment right after five."

Nick wondered if it was with Andrea Ellis.

The following morning he was at the office of the *Daily Standard* by eight o'clock. The bustle of the newsroom was intense as the afternoon edition was prepared for press. Nick found Mark Masters typing on a computer keyboard at his desk along one wall of the room. Taped to the wall by his desk were his bylined accounts of the five jewelry store robberies. Each article was longer than the previous one as the story took on a life of its own.

"Have you found a pattern?" Nick asked him.

Masters stopped typing and smiled. "More than that. I've got the answer. Look them over and see what you think."

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The first robbery had been March eleventh at Antique Gems down in Union Square. Then there was the Benson & Hopkins holdup March sixteenth on 17th Street, and the one that had brought Nick into it, Charisma Isis Jewelry on the twentieth. A robbery on March twenty-third made the second Saturday in a row the masked man had struck, at Culver Jewels off Park Avenue. Yesterday, Monday, it had been a branch of the Diamond Depot, way uptown near Columbia University. "Give me a hint," Nick said after reading all the articles.

"I'll do better than that. Come along with me right now and we'll see if my theory is correct."

"Where to?"

"The next target of this Gentleman Bandit."

"You know where it is?"

"I think so."

"Then let's go," Nick said.

By nine o'clock they were far uptown on the East Side, just a few blocks south of East Harlem. The jewelry store was the Diamond Exchange. As soon as he saw the sign above the lowered steel shutters, the pieces fell in place for Nick. "All right, Masters. I think I've figured it out. All I need is a Yellow Pages phone book for Manhattan."

The reporter chuckled. "I'll save you the trouble. The retail jewelers who were held up are Antique, Benson & Hopkins, Charisma Isis, Culver, and the Diamond Depot. This one is the Diamond Exchange. They're listed eleventh, sixteenth, twentieth, twenty-third, twenty-fifth, and twenty-sixth in the Yellow Pages. The first five correspond to the dates of the robberies, with intervals of five, four, three, and two days. This interval will be just one day, and today's the twenty-sixth. The Diamond Exchange is the twenty-sixth retail jeweler listed."

Nick nodded. "And all the robberies have been in the morning, shortly after the stores opened."

Mark Masters glanced at his watch. "The Diamond Exchange opens at nine-thirty."

"Should you call the police?"

"I phoned Sergeant Monaghan last night." He glanced up and down the busy street. "I hope they're here somewhere."

"What are you getting out of this?"

"A great story, I hope. Maybe even a Pulitzer."

They had backed into a doorway across the street from the Diamond Exchange, which remained shuttered and ignored by

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passersby. Presently, around twenty past nine, a stocky man wearing a raincoat arrived to open up. To Nick he seemed vaguely familiar as he unlocked the steel shutters, which rolled up electrically into their storage space. Then he used another key to open the front door and hurried inside, locking it behind him. They waited some more. Down the block a cable-television truck had pulled up and two men in work clothes got out.

"He'll unlock the door at nine-thirty," Mark Masters predicted. "There's no buzzer for customers to press, which means he leaves it unlocked all day."

They waited another ten minutes, and the store owner did as predicted. Another five minutes passed and no customers appeared. Perhaps it was too early for jewelry shopping, except for people like Donald Cathacarr.

Suddenly the bearded reporter gripped his arm. "Look at that fellow in the camel's-hair coat!"

Nick followed his gaze and saw a tall man wearing the type of coat and checked cap the witnesses had described. He walked past the jewelry store the first time, letting his eyes scan the street. From a distance he seemed older than Nick had expected.

He turned and retraced his steps to the door of the Diamond Exchange. As he entered, the pair of cable TV workmen sprang into action, bolting for the door. A woman who'd been waiting at a bus stop quickly followed.

"Come on!" Masters shouted. "This is it!"

They were halfway across the street when Nick heard the shots.

The first thing he saw as they entered the jewelry store was the blood on the camel's-hair coat. The man in the coat and cap was sprawled on the floor and Sergeant Monaghan was standing over him with his gun out. Mark Masters's jaw hung open and he ran for the telephone under the counter.

"Is he dead?" Nick asked.

"Dead as he'll ever be," Monaghan replied. He'd been the man who opened the store. The other three detectives, the two cable TV men, and the woman from the bus stop, were putting away their guns. "He came through the door and took out his weapon. He started to say his name was Velvet. I identified myself and told him to drop the gun, but he panicked when my backups came in. He raised the weapon and they had to fire."

Nick could see the pistol on the floor near the dead man's fingers. "He's not wearing his mask."

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"In his coat pocket," one of the detectives said. "We checked." He'd dropped to his knees beside the body and was going through the inside pockets.

Masters was on the phone already to his editor. "Rip out my story and clear a space on page one. Then transfer me to Jerry on rewrite. The police just shot and killed the Gentleman Bandit. I'm here on the scene and I've got Nick Velvet here too." While he waited he called over to Monaghan. "Any identification on him?"

"Not a thing. Just this."

"What?" the reporter asked.

"Half a hundred-dollar bill, cut right through the middle."

Nick waited while Masters dictated his story and a crew of police technicians arrived on the scene. He studied the body from a distance, wondering about the man in the camel's-hair coat. The face was pale and lined, and when Nick stepped closer he could see dirt under the fingernails. "Keep back," the police photographer cautioned.

Mark Masters finished calling in his story and replaced the phone. "It's a prize story, isn't it?" he asked Nick. "What's your reaction now that the false Nick Velvet has been run to earth?"

"My reaction? When we get out of here and you finish your work maybe we can have lunch together and talk about it."

The reporter's expression brightened. "That would be great! I'd love to run an in-depth interview about your exploits."

"Maybe I'll ask my wife to join us too."

"I'd like to meet her."

While he waited for the reporter, Nick phoned Gloria and asked her to come into the city for a late lunch. "You'll be reading in the papers that the police killed our bandit during a robbery this morning."

"Then it's over?"

"Just about."

Masters was at the *Daily Standard* office till nearly one, adding to his page one story for the late edition. Nick waited for him downstairs, taking the opportunity to phone Sergeant Monaghan. "I'm having lunch with Mark Masters and my wife Gloria, Sergeant. Perhaps you'd like to join us at Leon's, across the street from the *Standard* office."

Monaghan pleaded the press of business, but after a moment's conversation Nick persuaded him to come. Masters appeared just as he finished his call and they walked across the street to meet Gloria. She was dressed in a new white raincoat that reminded

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Nick it was spring in New York at last. He introduced her to Masters and they went inside, choosing a corner table with four chairs. "Monaghan is joining us," Nick explained.

Masters nodded. "Good! I'll get his view of it too."

Gloria smiled at him. "Your stories have certainly made Nicky a household name."

"Frankly, I was surprised how few people knew about what you do, Nick."

"I've always shied away from publicity," Nick replied, watching the sergeant cross the room to their table.

He sat down, greeting Gloria, and asked, "What was so important, Velvet?"

It was Mark Masters who answered. "I'm doing an in-depth story on the Gentleman Bandit and how we caught him. I want to interview all of you together."

"Including Gloria here?" the detective asked.

"She's the most important one of us all," Nick explained. "She was so upset about this jewel thief using my name that she offered me my usual fee to steal him and deliver him to her." He paused for a heartbeat. "And that's just what I've done."

"I know, Nicky," Gloria said. "You told me on the phone that the police had killed the Gentleman Bandit during a robbery."

"That's not exactly what I said. I told you that's what you'd be reading in the paper. I suspect it was some poor homeless man recruited to fill the role. The real Gentleman Bandit is here at this table."

"You mean you did it after all?" the reporter asked.

"No, Masters, you did. You're the Gentleman Bandit."

The reporter chuckled as if sharing a joke. "Can you imagine this, Sergeant? The man's an admitted thief and he's trying to blame these crimes on me. Did I kill that man this morning too?"

"You might as well have. In a sense you paved the way for his death. I knew almost immediately that he wasn't the so-called Gentleman Bandit. For one thing, he wasn't wearing the mask that had become his trademark. It was in his pocket. Then I noticed that he seemed older than the descriptions. He was pale and his fingernails were dirty. Of course, the half of a hundred-dollar bill in his pocket was the clincher. This was someone, probably a homeless man or ex-convict, who'd been given the coat and cap and mask to play a role. The hundred-dollar bill was cut in half with the promise that he'd get the other half following his

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performance. He cleaned himself up for it but missed his fingernails. He simply forgot to wear the mask, something the real bandit would never have done. You couldn't be certain the police would kill him, of course, but you told him to draw the gun and you tipped off Monaghan. You knew a dead man couldn't implicate you by saying you paid him to enter the jewelry store as a joke. Even if he wasn't killed, it would have been his word against yours."

Mark Masters seemed unable to decide between humor and outrage. He chose a middle course of reason, delivered with a grin. "So maybe he wasn't the real bandit, but that doesn't prove I was. What would I have to gain?"

Nick shrugged. "Lots of valuable jewelry, and perhaps more important, an opportunity to get your byline on the front page of the paper. As you said yourself, it could even get you a Pulitzer. People have killed for less. The addition of my name in your scheme simply built up the story, insuring greater coverage."

"You haven't convinced me," Sergeant Monaghan said.

"Nor me," added Gloria.

"Then how about this? In his article on the third robbery, the one we saw after the lineup, he reported that the bandit snatched the necklace from the hand of a woman customer. That is what actually happened, as I learned later from Andrea Ellis, but their story to the police was that he grabbed it from Balderstone's hand. The only way you could have reported the true sequence of events, Masters, was if you had been there. And there's more. Today at the jewelry store, you ran directly to the phone, even though it was hidden from view under a counter. You'd been there before. You'd checked the place out."

"There's one thing wrong with your theory, Velvet," Sergeant Monaghan said. "The mask only covered the bandit's eyes. His mouth and chin were clearly visible and not one of the victims mentioned this goatee that Masters wears. The bandit was cleanshaven."

Nick's hand shot out before the reporter could dodge aside, grabbing at the goatee. It came free with a yank, bringing a yelp from Masters. "One of the witnesses described a rash on the bandit's chin and that's how he got it, from yanking off his false goatee as he entered the stores to rob them."

When they reached home that afternoon, Gloria paid Nick his fee. ●

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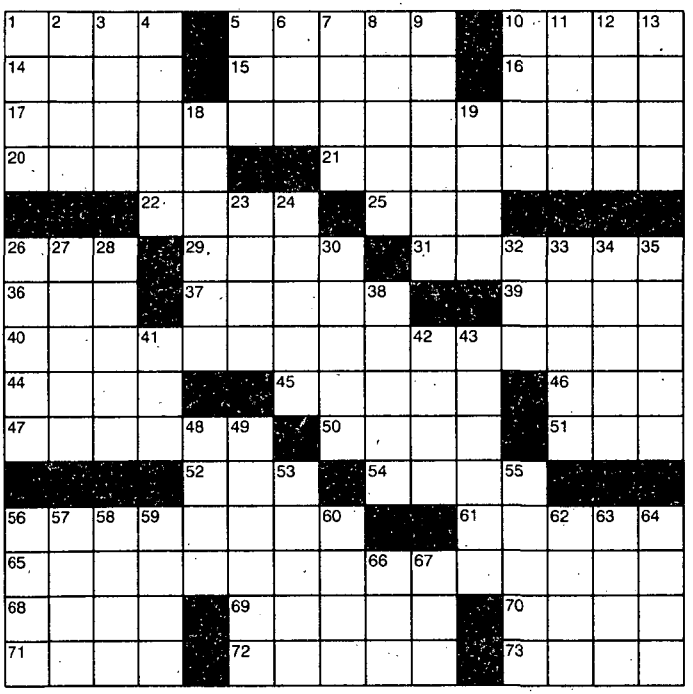
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Beware the Animals!

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 131

ACROSS

1. Audacity
5. Outer garments
10. Metal money
14. Maigret's mine
15. Capital of Ghana
16. This in Toledo
17. A roar? (Elizabeth Peters)
20. Item on a balance sheet
21. Legislators
22. Room in a casa

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25. Explosive letters
26. *The ___ Who Blew the Whistle,* Lillian Jackson Braun
29. *The ___ of Seven,* Mark Frost
31. Lord Peter or Lady Alleyn
36. Stray
37. *The ___*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky
39. Hindu sacred scriptures
40. Jurassic relic? (Frances and Richard Lockridge)
44. Oklahoma city
45. Forty-
46. Early year in the 7th century
47. Historians at times
50. Lab equipment
51. Govt. regulating agency
52. Greek vowel
54. Gels
56. Grating
61. Desert spots
65. Frivolous tool? (Liza Cody)
68. Helen's mother
69. Transparent
70. Head
71. Portent
72. Patricia Moyes's Inspector Tibbett
73. Selves

DOWN

1. Festive occasion
2. Kingsley or Martin
3. Anita ___, author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*
4. *Border ___*, Archer Mayer
5. "I think I ___ "
6. Autumn mo.
7. Yearn
8. E. C.Bentley's sleuth
9. Scholar
10. Scot for one
11. Former Christiania
12. Old Roman road
13. Negative votes
18. Gordianus's country
19. Play part
23. Caps
24. Indian or Chinese
26. Yielded
27. Sports space
28. Characteristic
30. ___ *Like a Gentleman,* Bernard Bastable
32. Receivers for CNN, CBS, *etc.*
33. Guides
34. Infer
35. 10 across in ancient Persia
38. Hues
41. Succeeded HST
42. Hawaiian goose
43. Demosthenes or Cicero
48. Repeat
49. Offensive odor
53. Sometimes site of bracelet
55. Often for Ovid
56. Scene of the 16th cent. massacre of Huguenots
57. Not us
58. Counsel
59. "___ old cowhand"
60. High school student
62. Obstacle
63. Outside, *comb. form*
64. "Baby says ___ mine," Beatles' "I Feel Fine"
66. Quick, *var.*
67. Distorted

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Art by Greg Voth

SONG OF EXPERIENCE

by Tom Tolnay

1.

A cameo-cut perfection to her face, black hair drawn close to the head, a delicate figure, and a gift for pensiveness caused many people, on first meeting Cordelia Hartley, to make the mistake of thinking she was shy. A kind of twentieth-century Emily Dickinson. Actually Cordelia Hartley was outspoken, ambitious, and individualistic, outcroppings of a responsive intelligence tempered by an indulgence in the romantic. But none of these qualities saved her from feeling unsure about the future. After being "sprung from Smith" with a baccalaureate of distinction in an indistinct assemblage of subjects weighted toward literature, she had mused away June and July in the house where she'd been taught to believe in the importance of knowing precisely what she intended to do with her life.

The house was a symmetrical, upright white colonial with faded

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sage-green shutters and brass doorknobs, and still rested on the original hand-layed stone foundation. The stately structure was planted at the outer edge of Arcadia, Rhode Island, which meant amidst wind-raked, sandy fields overrun with Queen Anne's lace and abutted by not entirely domesticated stands of maple and beech, and a scattering of pine. Her plan had been to devote a month to luxuriant leisure before plunging into the "meat market," as she explained to her classmates prior to graduation. "Assuming my parents and I can avoid strangling each other." But July melted into August, and the longer she remained in the house on the familiar street, the more difficult it became to find motivation.

Except for school breaks and several weeks each summer, she'd been away from home four years, not present therefore to monitor the slight yet continuing shifts in attitude toward her which were occurring in the minds of her parents. While she understood the necessity for these adjustments, Cordelia was nevertheless surprised to discover how pervasive they were. And the changes manifested themselves in a curious way: the absence of an aura that used to make her feel at home, part of a fabric larger than herself. It was not a sensation she could identify, such as the smell of the fresh-cut Christmas trees of her childhood or the cushion of the ice-blue rug beneath her terry-cloth slippers; what was missing was something more generalized . . . a collective, underlying flavor of everything they had eaten and worn and, somehow, thought and felt throughout her years of growing up.

Only a small cadre of writers remain whose primary interest is short fiction. Tom Tolnay numbers among them. In the two decades since his first short story was published, the author has experimented with many variations of the form, publishing pieces in genres as disparate as mystery, fantasy, and humor, in publications that range from prestigious literary journals to mainstream national magazines. Mr. Tolnay is writing of what he knows in the following story: He is a New Yorker born and bred and a former editor-in-chief of *Back Stage* newspaper. ¶

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The person she had been four years earlier now seemed little more than a gathering of partially remembered perceptions, a faded photograph that had been misplaced.

More than once she entered the dining room of her parents' house over that hot, slow-aired summer and sat down at her place with the unmistakable feeling of being an intruder, as though she'd entered a room occupied by a pair of lovers. Reviewing them with an effort to be objective—her mother's neck no longer seemed quite so long, the jowls having weakened and sagged; and her father's hair seemed to have been mowed down the center of his head, revealing scaly white scalp—Cordelia found it difficult to conceive of them as having shared secrets, a life which extended beyond her own. This was a reversal of roles, for they had seen her with a similar myopia four summers ago as she strode across the ivied campus in Northampton, Massachusetts, leaving her parents, silent and still, behind the rolled-up windows of the inwardly chilled, steel-gray Chrysler New Yorker.

If losing her place in the old house had deepened her uncertainty, by the time September was blowing in the fields, tarnishing the goldenrod and causing the dry thistle to click, she was additionally uncomfortable to find that she had no place to go. For though she had received a number of promising, flattering offers to pursue graduate work in Comparative Literature, the prospect of extending the process of formal education seemed increasingly less valid to her. Wasn't there a time in a woman's life when she ought to know something which had some immediate, practical application? One month before commencement, Cordelia had announced that she had not bothered to accept any of the graduate-school offers. Her friends were surprised, and they demanded to know what she intended to *do*. "Achieve reentry into the real world," she'd replied. Her parents were stunned . . . yet knew her too well to attempt to dissuade her. More than anything else, it was their remarkable restraint that put pressure on her the following autumn to take action. However, she still had only the most general idea of what to do about "the burden of potential" as she'd once phrased it to her college roommate, Geraldine Semper.

While she had been inspired by two or three instructors, it was now quite clear that the four years at Smith College had not prepared her for the world at large. And one crisp afternoon in October, burning leaves in a corner of the frayed, brown-tipped lawn out back, she tossed batches of reports and other educational

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debris into the brick barbeque pit, savoring a perverse sense of accomplishment as these records of her life darkened, coiled, and flared into flames, sending smoke, as a kind of signal, out over the neighborhood.

The next day she prepared a resume on the computer in her room, wrote to two sizable publishing companies in Boston and, momentarily satisfied with herself, began rereading *The Age of Innocence.* Each inspection of the mailbox over the succeeding weeks, however, seemed to set her back slightly further than where she'd been before writing the letters. An attempt to contact a girlhood friend had the same result—"Oh, she doesn't *live* in Arcadia anymore," the mother told her over the telephone. "Kathy's a reporter for the *Post* in Washington."

Her feelings of alienation in the white house thickened, making rooms that were quite airy seem suffocating. She found herself outdoors increasingly. In the brunt of an evening wind, a woolen scarf flung around her neck, she walked slowly past the tidy wood-frame bakery and the compact brick library and the unobtrusive shop with pewter bowls and porcelain flowers in the window. Suddenly Cordelia Hartley was repelled by the quiet stillness of the village. And from that time forward she yearned to place herself between tall, seemingly immutable buildings, where it was not necessary, or even possible, to cast a shadow. But it was more out of a sense of not belonging anywhere than from a desire to emigrate to a particular place that Cordelia declared, the following Saturday, over a silver-rimmed plate of tart spinach salad: "I'm going to live in New York."

Clever though they were, her parents couldn't help responding automatically, making disparaging remarks about "the city," a designation that was both a specific reference to New York and, indeed, to all cities. But in the days that followed, for the first time that Cordelia could recall, Mr. and Mrs. Hartley allowed a few positive comments about New York to escape their mouths—about the opportunities a major communications center might present to "a young woman of your potential." Cordelia cringed, yet felt a certain relief.

A neighbor, Victoria Noyes, who had been one year ahead of Cordelia in high school, and who had graduated from Wellesley, had gone to live and work in New York the previous summer, and Cordelia had indicated she just might look her up. Her mother had encouraged this idea somewhat too enthusiastically, or so it

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seemed to her daughter. Of course Victoria had gone to New York not as a last resort, but to pursue a career that had started out as vaguely artistic (she'd majored in art history) and had evolved, to Arcadia's bemusement, into fashion design. Every so often word would sift through the village that something of hers had appeared in a magazine, though there was never any indication in print to confirm this. One more citizen of New England had been consumed by New York City, neutralized by its vast swirl of namelessness.

Cordelia Hartley was in awe of New York. It wasn't the gray apprehension that parents beyond the urban sprawl acquire when they see incidents of violence reported on television. She was in awe of how New York might alter the fabric of her history, her perspective, her personality, so that at some undetermined moment in the years ahead she would no longer be Cordelia Hartley, but someone else entirely.

Although she framed a smile throughout the preparations for her departure, Cordelia felt as if she were walking across a surface that was not merely slippery, but often too thin to support her. As a gesture of independence, she had refused the repeated offers of assistance from her parents—to help her pack, to pick up the railroad ticket, to drive her to the station. After the suitcases were swung into the trunk by the driver, the dull green cab strained away from her house and she waved goodbye through the closed window. It was a farewell not merely to her parents, but to the portico over the front steps and the swinging wooden gate and the stiff ivy clutching the stone and mortar of the chimney. And she wondered how the vines, though subjected to intense, steady heat during the woodburning season, had managed to survive year after year.

2.

The burned-out tenements of the Bronx past which she was drawn—each scene framed a moment in the train window before flicking by—did not depress her as they might another first-time visitor. And even though swept sidewalks were a minimum requirement of civilization where she was raised, the skeletons of wheelless automobiles at the curbs of upper Manhattan did not make her feel superior. To Cordelia, whose apprehensions at this particular time were overcome by a more immediate sense of adventure, the industrial grit on the blank faces of factories repre-

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sented the London of Dickens's *Bleak House;* and the dark men sprawled on street corners were the luckless wayfarers of Crane's *Experiment in Misery.*

At last Cordelia pulled into that other New York, below 96th Street, the New York which intimidated her, for it had expectations of her. She passed over the worn, flesh-colored marble, through the pillared tomb of Grand Central Station, past newsstands, coffee shops, shoeshine stands, rest rooms, hot-dog counters, souvenir shops, moving among business people who pushed past with short, quick strides and a vaguely startled look, or who were anchored by their briefcases in ticket lines. Emerging from the marble caverns, Cordelia found no remarkable change in the level of light, for the sky—what little she could see of it—was caped by dark-streaked clouds. Gripping the suitcase and shoulder bag with a wary tightness, she glanced down the swarming sidewalk with a casual swivel of her head, as if she'd gazed into a New York rush countless times before. A man in a tan, broad-brimmed hat, leaning against the granite wall of the station, watched her set down the leather suitcase; now he took his hands out of his pockets and straightened up. But Cordelia took hold of the suitcase again, and the man leaned back against the wall.

From all directions at once the noise came, seemingly aimed directly at her, as if she stood at the focal point of the city: jackhammers pounding the macadam, the subway grumbling beneath the sidewalk, jets piercing the sky, bells and whistles, people hurtling past—one of them talking loudly to herself—trucks and buses groaning and honking their way across the narrow island. Collectively, the sounds seemed to knock her off balance. As she reaffirmed her footing and stood there a few minutes, trying to attract a cab with abrupt waves of her unconvincing hand, she was overcome by a gush of feeling, the way Keats had sung of Cortez and his men feeling upon sighting the Pacific Ocean from a peak in Darien for the first time. New York!

In the maroon canvas shoulder bag, folded and tucked in her striped nylon wallet, was a check for six thousand, one hundred and twenty-three dollars—every penny of her savings. A room was awaiting her at the Marlboro Plaza. The residential hotel had formerly been restricted to women. As part of society's attempt to make up for thousands of years of habit, they had opened their doors to men as well, but women still greatly dominated the facilities, and the few men—those who were not obviously or avowedly

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gay—were watched like exotic, endangered animals. The accommodations had been arranged at her father's suggestion. "Just until you can establish private quarters," he'd said, looking up from the financial pages to eye his daughter, still uncomfortable with the idea that she might feel in her body sexual urges that he, though decreasingly, felt in his.

A few women from her graduating class had indicated they would be migrating to New York after college, but none of them had been what she considered a friend. Cordelia also had a contact in Victoria. However, even as she stepped into the gutter outside Grand Central, finally managing to flag down a cab, she knew that despite everyone's expectations, she would not look up the Arcadia expatriate. They had never been particularly close, and to Cordelia the facts that they had lived down the street from each other and had attended the same high school were insufficient reasons to force their lives together now in New York. In some ways, it seemed to her that these were especially good reasons *not* to reach out to her. She saw this adventure as an extension into the future, not a dragging along of the past.

The "Marlboro girls," as some of the Midwestern residents called themselves, came from a much broader intellectual, financial, and geographical stratum than she'd experienced at Smith: There were women raised between cornfields residing next to women born in Paris; daughters of building developers dined with daughters of house painters; women with master's degrees confided in high school dropouts. Cordelia was amazed to meet Alicia Greenberg, a Ph.D. in psychology who was working as a clerk in a stock brokerage. All of this made Cordelia feel somewhat more justified in having bypassed her own opportunities for graduate work. And she took the time to notice how New York wore down so many factors in the backgrounds and personalities of people that they all became part of something bigger. The smallness of her place in the city's scheme did not make her feel helpless, however. She saw it as a natural stage in that unfathomable yet energizing process of becoming a New Yorker; and she was encouraged because it quickly became apparent that one of the principal requirements for belonging here was to have been born somewhere else.

The inmates of the Marlboro thought and behaved in many respects the way Cordelia and her friends had at college: consuming quantities of white wine, talking late into the night about

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careers and music and movies and getting their own apartments and, especially, about the men they saw around the city or at the offices where some of them worked. Even the women who wore their liberated attitudes like the latest helmet-shaped haircuts would spend a great deal of time talking about men. Many of the rumors that filtered through the honeycomb of living quarters involved men as well—the strangers brought into their rooms who, after a single evening of dubious pleasure, had disappeared back into the city. There were also the rumors which involved certain pairs of women at the hotel. Yes, it was very much like life in a college dormitory.

At dinnertime they were drawn out of their rooms by the faintly sour odor of reconstituted potatoes and stewed meat. Curiously, "as if to keep us from rioting," the coffee was always fresh and rich. When she didn't treat herself to soup and salad on the outside, Cordelia would sit at the square table in the hotel's dining room with Nell Barrows, a six-foot, pleasantly awkward Californian from her floor. Usually Cordelia would only pick at the servings, unable to satisfy that hollowness in the vicinity of her stomach. To her astonishment most of the others ate heartily, finishing everything as though feeding on the very substance of the city in order to be assimilated more speedily into its elusive, inscrutable patterns.

After dinner the residents repaired to the lobby to meet friends or dates, to evening classes at the New School or Hunter or NYU, to the movies alone, or, as was often the case with Cordelia, directly to their rooms. The walls of the compartments seemed to amplify rather than block out sound, forcing them to live with the laughter and music and hammering and televisions and even the sobbings of the adjoining rooms. Each was furnished with a bed and chest of drawers, and each was exactingly square, with high ceilings that caused Cordelia to comment to Nell, "Since they designed these rooms like bird cages, we'll just have to learn to fly."

Living expenses in the city were considerably higher than she'd anticipated, and her discovery of Bloomingdale's aggravated this condition. Gazing at the slender beauties leaning across the glass counters produced in Cordelia an acute sense of not belonging. In part, it was this foreignness she was attempting to dispel when she descended into the street one morning with the idea of finding a job . . . only to return with a few small bundles in a large

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Bloomie's shopping bag. This continued until it became clear she had cut deeply into her bank account and, even more distressing, that her new acquisitions had not managed to conceal (she was convinced) that she had emigrated from a slow, out-of-touch town in Rhode Island.

Since her image of herself—resourceful, energetic, self-reliant—prevented her from asking for funding from home, Cordelia resolved to stop her shopping binges and organize her efforts to obtain employment. She began to get up early to search the *Times* classifieds. She registered with two employment agencies, and one afternoon came across a copy of *Publishers Weekly* in the hotel's lobby and read virtually every page. But she limited her prospects by setting rigid requirements as to job function, salary, and, not so incidentally, the opportunity to meet men—for the lack of them in her social circle and at the Marlboro heightened her feelings of isolation. After a few interviews produced nothing more than one instance of mild interest, however, she began looking beyond publishing—advertising, public relations, and on one particularly discouraging day, secretarial work. That had not worked out either; she had been declared "overqualified"—and in a tone that seemed to suggest she had a communicable disease.

"Any luck today?" Nell inquired as they entered the elevator at the Marlboro.

"As far as I can tell," Cordelia said tartly, "the only good-paying jobs where you can also meet people in this city belong to streetwalkers."

Occasionally Cordelia and Nell would go to a pub on the East Side, a popular hangout for young, single—and semi-single—professionals. They sat at a small table in the amber light, each sipping a gin and tonic with a twist, attempting to hear each other above the sounds of the CD player. The men, mostly standing with drinks in their hands, kept glancing around at the women, mostly sitting. Sometimes a man, shirt unbuttoned, gold chain tight at the neck, would move between the tables in their direction and the friends would stop speaking for a moment, but more often than not he would pass on to another table, returning to chuckle demonstratively with his friends if the advance was rebuffed. Filtered by the shadows, the men looked surprisingly attractive to Cordelia, but there was an air of desperation about them, and about the women too, that made her turn to Nell one night and say, "I've had enough."

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In the Marlboro, Cordelia would begin reading a novel only to pick up another before it was finished; these days most of her reading time was spent leafing through magazines, eyeing the photographs of glossy men and women in attire and poses that she rarely saw in real life—an elbow raised higher than the open hand in an absurd greeting, or the model's arms wrapped around herself in gleeful narcissism. Although she had never watched "the tube" very much, here she would let the television play while she rinsed out undergarments and stockings or wrote a letter to her college roommate, who was now in an anthropology program at Berkeley. She wouldn't shut it off until she was ready to spread out in bed beneath the faint smear of red light from the electric sign ten stories below her window.

3.

Three days before Christmas, Cordelia rode the train back to Rhode Island and was met at the station by her father. "I missed you and Mom," she heard herself say, pecking his dry cheek, skin that reminded her of starched cotton.

"Good to have you home," he said, picking up her suitcase.

Though she'd been gone only two and a half months, something about the way he bent to open the door of the Chrysler New Yorker made it seem as if her father had aged several years. When they drove through the village on their way home, the tinsel and garland in the pharmacy window saddened Cordelia. Her mother, too, seemed to have changed, with a few more streaks of silver in her hair and a rasp in her voice.

"Lovely to have you home." She smiled broadly, taking her daughter's hand.

"I'm glad to be back."

After sprinkling cool water on her face in the bathroom, Cordelia joined her parents in the living room, sinking deeply into the soft cushions of the armchair as her parents sat side by side on the sofa. It took them only a minute to get to the point. "We've been expecting news from you."

Cordelia lied with an ease that disturbed her: "I've been called back for a second interview with a terrific publisher."

"Marvelous," said her parents, leaning forward on the sofa in expectation of details.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Cordelia added, "until I have some definite word."

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Her parents glanced at each other and let the subject slip away into a description of recent meteorological patterns in the area. Soon her mother disappeared into the kitchen.

A three-foot-tall artificial Christmas tree was centered on a reproduction drop-leaf table, and her father arose and forced the plug into the outlet, causing the tiny white lights to blink on. "There," he said, "that'll brighten things up a bit."

Moving from the rectangular living room into the square dining room, with the pale blue Delft dishes set out on the mahogany table, Cordelia had the feeling this house was not where she'd grown up but a place she had visited several times in a dream. The chicken breast, simmered in wine the way she liked it, seemed flavorless to her, and the conversation over dinner did not flow so much as evolve in an orderly way, as if in accordance with a schedule. Already she was dreading the days before her—the questions she would be asked, the concessions she would make, the nameless, unexpressed anger that would fill her heart.

That evening, in her bedroom, she looked over the relics of her own past—an Earth Day poster, a bone-handled hairbrush, a walnut student desk, a quilted jewelry box—with the detached curiosity of a visitor in a museum. Later she found that even her own bed did not fit the contours of her body any longer, as if it were a lumpy mattress in a motel along the road between Rhode Island and New York.

4.

On winter mornings in New York the floor of her room received a golden door of sunlight which, as the minutes stacked up into hours, would slowly shut beside the bed. Cordelia would arise sluggishly, drawing onto her body, usually, the beige woolen skirt and ivory-toned silk blouse, her blazer (a silver rose pinned to its collar), and finish off with a dash of white gold inserted through each earlobe. Despite the poised effect of her appearance, ever since returning from her visit home a low-keyed desperation had filtered into the process of seeking employment: The longer it took to generate an income, the greater the likelihood she would have to flee the city—to leave the only place in which someone who was neither here nor there seemed welcome. But where else could she go?

Along Fifth Avenue she ran into Stephanie Bowles, with whom she'd attended a psychology class at Smith. Stephanie, as luxuri-

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ously attractive and self-assured as an Angora cat, gave Cordelia a three-minute synopsis of her life in New York—her "male friend" (a surgeon), her employment in corporate financial management, her skiing vacation to Switzerland, her summerhouse in the Hamptons. "We *must* keep in touch," Stephanie said, raising her perfect chin just enough to seem both friendly and superior at the same instant. "I'm in the phone book." And then she was gone, stepping back into the swarm of anonymity. Cordelia passed down the avenue out of step with the rest of the city, aware that it would be impossible, at this juncture of her life, to keep in touch with Stephanie.

5.

Cordelia Hartley, with a B.A. in English Literature—a tool ill-suited to the age of electronics—was finally offered and immediately accepted a position at an academic book publishing company. The job was in production rather than editorial, but Ms. Hartley was assured that production, over time, often blended with editorial at a small company. As soon as she finished the callback interview and left the crusty old building, Cordelia called her friend, who worked at an art and antique auction gallery on Madison Avenue. "Now we'll be able to get free books!" Nell declared cheerfully. "Sure," quipped Cordelia, "oddball scholarship for the university gristmill!" That evening, in a long phone call back home, Cordelia told her parents all about her newly acquired employment; they sounded delighted, proud of her for the first time since graduation. "Good show!" her father said more than once, and her mother added, "Quite impressive." And though Cordelia had sensed a certain relief in their good wishes, she felt fortunate to have such a supportive mother and father.

The following Monday she reported to the head of production, Martin Gilmore, a man with gray woodshavings for hair and round black eyes which jerked in their sockets as if to make sure not a detail escaped his scrutiny. The demands she made on herself for accuracy and completeness were noticed right away, and she was thrust headlong into the production schedule. Though she had done some editorial as well as production work on her college literary magazine, at the company where she worked the budgets and deadlines were regarded with "a weird gravity—virtually a religious commitment," Cordelia wrote to Geraldine. "Yet they always seem to be over budget and past deadline." Despite the

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arguments she'd often made against commercialism, the marketplace did seem to Cordelia to assign a measurable value to each individual's contribution in producing the final product.

Another aspect of the job which pleased her was that an author would occasionally surface over a telephone line or, more rarely, materialize in their offices on Park Avenue South. After Cordelia had been with the company five months, and had demonstrated her language skills as well as business sense, she had an encounter with one of them. Jonathan Dale, thirty-five, was short and square-bodied, and his hand had seized hers with the clamminess of the clay that could be found at low tide along the Rhode Island shore. But the mass of reddish brown hair that covered his face and his booming baritone made him impossible to ignore. His editor, Mrs. Eleanor Goldman, had called upon Cordelia, who had done all the proofreading for his *Meditations on Marcus Aurelius,* to sit in with them as they discussed "the innumerable alterations Dale has made on the page proofs." Cordelia recited each insertion as the author explained his rationale for the change to the editor. At last Mrs. Goldman glanced toward heaven—actually toward the administrative offices on the floor above, where cost control was the prevailing catechism. "With the illustrations and bibliography and index and footnotes, this book is already far too expensive to produce, Jonathan."

The author had gotten upset enough by this statement to slap his pudgy hand on her desk, but he had been taken with Cordelia, and a week later asked her to go with him for a drink after work.

If Jonathan Dale impressed Cordelia more as a caricature than as a man, she nevertheless enjoyed meeting and working with him. It was only after she'd listened to him complain about the way his book was being handled through three beers that she decided to decline his offer next time. In the wider pattern of her life the date merely served to intensify the emptiness she'd been feeling. And for the first time in a long while she thought about Jim, the U. of Mass. jock who had followed her around campus during her last semester at Smith. Only now was she beginning to appreciate such devotion, and she tried to find her old college address book. Jim lived and taught physical education in Boston, and she wondered if he ever thought about her. Is it possible that he'd come visit me in New York? she wondered. But when she found that she couldn't even recall his face with much vividness, she stopped looking for his telephone number.

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6.

Cordelia moved into an apartment with Nell. The two and a half rooms were small, but decidedly quieter than the Marlboro. After a full day of work they lethargically unpacked boxes and inserted their stockings and underwear in the dresser—two drawers each—and set a squat table here, a clock radio there, and hung a potted geranium before the feeble light in the window. If the apartment freed them from the chaos of communal life, it also placed new demands on them. Money had to be pooled for food and furnishings, and decisions had to be made as to how to spend that money. Sometimes they disagreed, or became annoyed over dishes left in the sink. And there was the business of gathering laundry and hauling it to the laundromat three blocks away. But compensating for these day-to-day operational nuisances were the possibilities that this new self-reliance, this new privacy opened for them.

Cordelia found herself staring at the smooth, firm bodies of young men in suits and ties on the streets, and young men in tight jeans and T-shirts in buses and subways; and in particular at the black-haired, keen-eyed assistant production manager in her office. Brian Purdy retained a measure of boyish flamboyance and yet seemed to know exactly what he wanted. His moustache, black and trim; and the way, from time to time, he would shake his head back like a horse shifting the lay of its mane; and the muscular economy of his long legs, together with his equally sharp mind, had the effect of releasing the pressure around Cordelia's chest. While Brian seemed serious, or at least intent about his work, he was also ready to laugh at any provocation: His staccato chuckle would carry out of his glassed-in cubicle, and she would look over and watch him for a few moments—until the afternoon he'd caught her gazing at him.

What Cordelia did not fully understand until the Friday evening he escorted her to a concert—the American Symphony Orchestra was performing Beethoven's *Eroica* at Carnegie Hall—was that aspects of her appearance and manner also spoke to Brian Purdy: her daring wit, which had more than once eased the tension in the office; her gray eyes, which seemed to know more than they should. And later, her expressiveness over the spectacle of the orchestra had delighted him, too.

During the intermission at Carnegie, as the lights sprinkled soft, warm gold over their faces and hands, they remained in their

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seats, and Cordelia learned that Brian had studied book design in England; with an enthusiasm that seemed quaint to her he related stories of Claude Garamond and John Baskerville and Frederic and Bertha Goudy. Since her focus had always been on what letters conveyed when joined into words and sentences—rather than how they communicated entirely on their own, by the grace and precision of their design—this conversation was like being let into the mysteries of an exotic culture. With his enthusiasm seeping into her, she allowed herself to believe that it was more than the joy of discussing well-produced books that was giving him pleasure that evening.

When the several callbacks of the conductor had been concluded, their eardrums throbbing, the palms of their hands tingling, Cordelia and Brian descended the curving flight of stairs and flowed out of the hall. The cool evening air felt abrupt against their faces as they walked east along 57th. This street seemed to function as a divider, separating the commercialism of lower from the culturalism of upper Manhattan, where most of the museums and concert halls were situated. Multitudes of mostly young New Yorkers stepped by with a pressing gait, each carried forward, Cordelia sensed, by the energy implicit in having someplace to go, something to do. In the distance the improbable skyscrapers were emitting pronged points of light. Close by, the high and wide shop windows shimmered with silvery ornaments, silken raiment. The sidewalk over which they moved seemed to give gently beneath her feet, as though it were carpeted. Cordelia could feel something whole and alive stretching inside, beneath her breasts, as though that part of her which she had been afraid of losing along the streets of New York were reaching out to embrace the shadows of the future.

Brian introduced Cordelia to a small cafe with latticed windows and chopping-block tables; each ordered a goblet of red wine. The couple found more to say about their jobs, books they'd read, life in New York as compared to England and Rhode Island. Soon the conversation drifted into the nature of beauty. Though Cordelia was sure-minded, not given to unrealistic idealism, on this particular evening she found herself defending a concept of ideal beauty. "Somewhere in the world, at some point in history," she declared, "there lives or has lived a person who would be judged beautiful by virtually everyone." Glancing at the swells of her flowing blouse, Brian could find no reason to disagree. The chime

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of glasses and silverware blended with the sting of wine on the tongue, as well as with the flicker of the candle in the pink bowl, to give Cordelia a fleeting, fragile insight into what it felt like to be a New Yorker.

The couple emerged from the cafe, out onto the Avenue of the Americas, broad and aglitter with the lights of shops and restaurants, and as Cordelia stood at the edge of the curb, Brian strode into the street and shook his hand at a yellow cab; it swerved over and stopped a few feet away from them. As he held the door open for his companion, he said, "The secret is in the way you flip the wrist," grinning over how he'd outmaneuvered two other couples to capture this private conveyance on a Friday night in the world's most populous island. Cordelia smiled, too, thinking of how Clark Gable had bragged of his hitchhiking prowess in *It Happened One Night,* and how Claudette Colbert had demonstrated that the thigh was mightier than the thumb.

As the cab bumped northward, gliding through the lamplit lanes of Central Park, and then steered crosstown and up Third Avenue, they spoke again of the splendid music which still vibrated in their bodies, falling silent only when his slightly moist hand slid over hers. On 82nd Street the cab, rattling happily, drew up before a five-story walk-up, one in a block-long row that stood shoulder to shoulder.

Each building was different from the one beside it: a pair of black iron handrails, or a chiseled bite in the stone facade, or a glowing white globe over the door, or a crowd of garbage cans painted purple, or a six-by-six patch of earth out front cluttered with the wilted spears of irises. Cordelia had decided not to ask Brian up. The apartment wasn't prepared to receive a visitor, and Nell had probably already showered and was getting ready for bed. But she made a promise to herself: Within a week or two she would invite Brian to her apartment for dinner, when Nell was out for the evening, and allow life to follow its own flow, like the stream that meandered through the fields behind the white house of her childhood in Arcadia.

Squeezing Brian's hand, she leaned toward his smooth-shaven jaw and briefly covered the corner of his mouth with her lips. Then she hopped out of the cab and stood on the curb. "Thank you for a lovely evening," she said, a touch of music entering her voice.

Brian creased his face into a smile and said out the half-open window, "I'll call you tomorrow."

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Cordelia turned, crossed the sidewalk, and went up the stairs of the brownstone with a sense, for the first time, that she was returning home. Brian watched her retrieve the keys from the bottom of her purse. Now the cab coughed a plume of smoke and rattled down the block. The young woman with the shiny black hair stood on the landing, watching the bulky, mustard-colored automobile disappear around the corner. Then she let herself inside, and went down the dim narrow corridor. Approaching the stairs, Cordelia hummed a few bars of something, perhaps an adaptation of the music she'd heard in the tiered, glorious hall on 57th Street. Music wasn't simply played at Carnegie, she decided: It continued to resound in the imagination long after the audience had left. Cordelia could see the chipped gold paint on the balconies, the brass handrails worn into richness, the heavy, limp red drapes that tempered the reverberations, the arches that sprang the music across the expanses of upright space so that one could savor the sound, the history, the passion more or less forever.

7.

A swift, massive cloud surrounded Cordelia and dragged her in back of the stairs, throwing her down on the floor of white tiles, the hexagon shapes of which burned deeply into her mind. It happened so quickly that she was too startled to cry out or to feel pain in her throbbing limbs and spine. Hands were jerking at her skirt and blouse, and as she twisted her body and tried to get up, long oily fingers began squashing her breasts. Frantically, she swung her arms and kicked, trying desperately to free herself from the mass of muscle and bone. But the weight, the force against her, was far too great, too determined. It was when she saw the fierce eyes and sharp lips set deeply in the twisted face of the cloud that she screamed. Or so she believed, for she couldn't hear her own sounds above the crash of cymbals in her ears, as if the *Eroica* had just reached the pinnacle of its harmonic power.

A ball of jointed skin came flying at her face: The knuckles struck the bridge of her nose, the bone seeming to give way under the blow. Her face caught on fire, and she tasted the salt of blood. A frantic yank at the nylon against her stomach snapped the elastic away from her hips. Infuriated into a burst of energy, she freed her arms and swung her small fists, trying to hurt, trying to prevent herself from being subdued. But the heavy cloud dropped upon her, flattening her like a cigarette butt on the sidewalk, and

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a harsh cylinder of pain shot up her spine. She screamed and raked her fingernails across the cloud, and suddenly it lifted off her and was gone, as abruptly as it had arrived, disappearing into the dimness out of which it had materialized.

Cordelia felt weak and remote, as if lying out unprotected in an empty, vast, cold, gray field over which a brittle wind was rasping. The scrapes on her skin made it feel as if a rodent was gnawing at her knees, but she couldn't get her hands to move and chase it away. Once she thought she heard the voice of her mother calling, "Cordelia! Cordelia!" from a distance, telling her to stop jumping in the leaves and come in for lunch. When she opened her eyes she found herself sprawled over the tile floor, beneath iron stairs, beside a trash can. And she realized the sounds she'd heard had been her own cries.

At last she placed both hands on the tile floor and extended her arms to force her torso upward until she was leaning against the cold wall. She saw that her skirt was pushed up, and as she stared at her ripped stockings a wave of nausea swept over her, fleetingly calling to mind the day she'd turned sixteen and had nearly drowned off the beach at Watch Hill.

8.

With more effort than she'd ever been able to summon at one time in her life, Cordelia Hartley managed to hoist herself onto her wobbly legs. One halting step at a time she climbed the seemingly endless flight of stairs. At the first door on the second floor, her hand shaking wildly, she finally inserted the key into the cylinder slot, letting herself inside. Nell was not in the apartment after all, and Cordelia felt relieved to be alone. After engaging the deadbolt, she staggered into the bathroom and locked this door as well. Three steps brought her to the bathtub, and she forced the rubber stopper into the drain and turned on the faucet. Now she noticed herself in the long, narrow mirror. Her right cheek was faintly purple where it had struck the tile. Her nose, which throbbed with pain, was bleeding softly. Her mouth was bent as if in a permanent, silent scream.

Tearing off a wad of toilet tissue, she held it under the cold water in the sink and pressed it against the swollen bridge of her nose, angry that she felt grateful it did not seem to be broken. In a few moments she managed to stop the bleeding. Cordelia unbuttoned her blouse and peeled each article of clothing off like dead,

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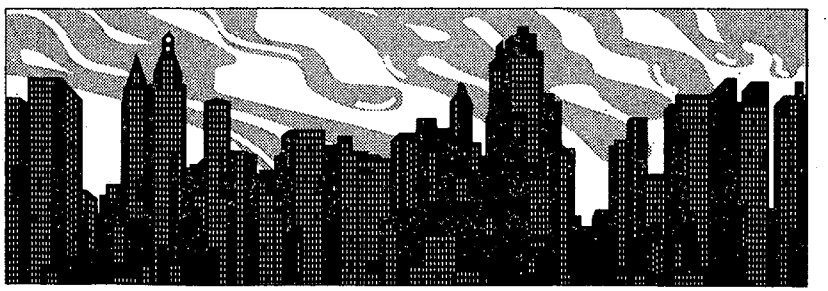
sunburned skin, dropping the layers at her feet until her trim, well-formed body was entirely bare. With bitter fascination she inspected the welts and red splotches on her legs and arms. A pain shot across her back, swiftly fading into a welcome numbness.

Reaching up, she took hold of the shower-curtain bar, raised her leg, and inserted her foot into the water. It was extremely hot, but instead of withdrawing her limb, she drew her other leg into the tub. Holding her breath to counter the heat, she lowered herself gently into the steaming water. The tub was more than half full, but she did not turn off the faucet. Already the steamy mist had begun to collect on the mirror, obliterating her reflection. Stretching her body out fully, she allowed the water to cover her up to the neck, turning her entire body a raw pink. Cordelia rested her head against the back of the tub, and closed her eyes as the water continued to get deeper and hotter.

To escape the reeling flashes of disconnected thought—the brutal cloud, Brian, her mother and father, her life past and present—Cordelia concentrated intensely on the sound of the water gurgling out of the faucet. Somehow it comforted her. For the longer she listened, the more she realized that it incorporated a certain musicality. As the water rose in the tub, she began to notice other sounds—a dull clanking in the pipes, an automobile horn down on the avenue, the roar of an aircraft overhead, an ambulance whining in another neighborhood, a man and woman shouting at each other next door. The water continued to gurgle and the city continued to wail, and Cordelia heard these sounds together as a kind of cacophonous symphony. And as she listened, in some remote corner of her consciousness she sensed that her former self, which had been accumulating within her from the day she was born, was escaping through a slow leak in her body, letting itself out to make room for this new being that she was about to become. ●



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Two in Love

by Martin Naparsteck

"You're crazy, you know that? You're crazy," he said. He wasn't quite screaming, but exasperation dominated his voice.

"Well, if I'm so crazy," she said, smugness entering her tone as she slowed her delivery, "who were all those calls to up in Brigham City? And where did that pack of matches come from, the one that says Squatters on it? Squatters isn't the type of place you go to alone. It's the type of place you go to with somebody."

The timbre of finality edging her voice, as usual, defeated Jason. He leaned back in his chair, his elbows resting on its arms but his hands still on the table, fork in one, steak knife in the other. "I just want to enjoy my meal. I am not having an affair. I am having a T-bone steak. You are the only woman I love. I want to eat my baked potato. Why is it that some days you tell me you love me and other days you start in on me? Do you want some sherry?" He leaned forward, reaching for the carafe.

Before he could grasp it, Kaylene picked it up and filled his glass. "I do love you, and I do love only you, and I know and believe you love me. It's just that sometimes I don't know how I could ever be so lucky as to be married to someone like you, so I guess I don't believe it's possible for you to love me, so I guess I think you must

Quirky, playful, and original, the work of Martin Naparsteck is not easily forgotten. A full-time writer, Mr. Naparsteck currently lives in Logan, Utah. Although he frequently incorporates the landscape of his new home in his fiction, his stories depend less on time and place than on the convoluted workings of his characters' minds. Mr. Naparsteck writes in other genres, but recently he's taken a shine to mystery. ✝

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be having an affair, but most of the time I know it's not so, and I guess I should stop talking and just eat." She cut a piece of steak and held it for a moment just above her plate. "I love you." She ate her steak.

The next morning, after Jason had driven away in his BMW, Kaylene searched his closet. She put a hand in each pocket of each sports jacket, each suit coat, the windbreaker, the rainwear, everything he might have worn if—when—he was with another woman. When she found nothing beyond a rubber band, an unopened pack of Kleenex, and a great deal of lint, she realized an unexplored emotion had overcome her, had worked its way from her stomach through her chest into her neck. At first she assumed it was relief, but after a few moments she knew it was something else: a belief Jason suspected she would go through his pockets, so he must have removed every incriminating item, every item that would prove him guilty of having an affair. And why would he even suspect she would look through his pockets unless he had reason to believe she would find something? Oh yes, she understood Jason much better than he gave her credit for.

Her logic was heavy; it possessed the weight of truth. She no longer suspected; she now knew. And she knew, too, what she would do. She would discover who the woman was; she would confront the hussy; she would kill her.

She opened a can of alphabet soup; she loved the games she and Jason played with alphabet soup when they were first married, the way they spelled out I LOVE YOU and JASON LOVES KAYLENE and I'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER. She poured the soup into a colander, and when the broth had drained into the sink, she poured the letters into a bowl circled with green hearts. Using a spoon, she placed each letter on the matching dinner plate. She spelled the words she wanted to spell and placed the plate on the oak dining-room table, at Jason's spot. Then she drove to Indiantown, to the shop where the ancient man—she thought he was a Navajo holy man—sold herbs and bulbs and potions to whites who knew too little of his culture to realize they were being cheated. But she liked to shop there; it enhanced her sense of being constantly at play with the world. After buying a half-dozen items, she stopped at Frontier Pies to have scones and, as always, ice water. She seldom drank anything else, certainly never alcohol. Still she liked when Jason at every evening meal offered to pour wine for her; she didn't want to be omitted from any part of

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his life. She ate her scones slowly. By the time she pulled her Jaguar into the long, winding driveway, Jason's BMW was already there. As she walked around his vehicle, she smelled the heat of the motor. Her timing was as planned, and when she entered the house she saw, as hoped, Jason standing, leather case in hand, at the dining room table, reading the plate: A TRYST ISN'T RIGHT and REAL ADULTS DON'T DO ADULTERY and FLINGS ARE BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH and ONLY FOOLS FOOL AROUND.

"Playing games?" His voice was flat.

She couldn't tell if he was angry. "We always used to play games. Remember? When we were first married?"

"We still play games, I guess."

"Remember when I went to that bar and sat there, and you came in a half-hour later, and all those men tried to pick me up? I remember one was really cute. But I pretended I wasn't interested, and you came over and said in a deep voice, 'Can I buy you a drink, lady?' and I said, 'Let's not waste time with a drink,' and we immediately left together, and the *look* on the face of the bartender!"

"I remember." His smile became pleasant and reflective. "Remember when we drove down to Provo and registered in that motel as Mr. and Mrs. Smith?"

Kaylene giggled. "The clerk asked you for ID and you said, 'If you don't believe your customers we can go someplace else,' and he said, 'Well, how long do you want the room for?' and you said, 'Just an hour,' and he kicked us out." Her giggling was almost uncontrollable. She was enjoying the reminiscing immensely. "How I loved those games. Let's play some games again."

"We play games every day. Isn't this a game?" He nodded at the plate. But his voice possessed not the least bit of rancor. It was in fact a playful voice, an accepting voice.

"I love playing games with you," she said and hugged him.

The alphabet soup, she realized days later, was a mistake. It resulted from a pique; she needed to avoid piques. She needed to know the name of the woman who was having an affair with her husband. If she knew who the woman was, she could kill her. And then Jason would be all hers again. Another pique would just get in the way.

She called Jason at his office and told him she was driving up to the cabin to see if it needed any cleaning for the summer. She was

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calling from her car phone and was already north of Salt Lake City.

"Sweetheart, you know I don't like you going up there by yourself. It's isolated."

"Oh, don't be silly, sweeties. It's just a couple of hours and if you think about it, being isolated makes it safer. No self-respecting bad guy would be caught dead in the middle of the northern desert like that."

"Please, darling, I insist. I'm going to be tied up all day with clients. And I have to prepare for a trial that begins in three days. I would go with you if I could. Why don't we go together Saturday?"

"I'd love to go again on Saturday. All the more reason to go up today and clean it. So it can be ready for whatever games we play on the weekend, honeybun." She felt like giggling. She felt great. The teasing nicknames, the anticipation of Saturday, even the aloneness of the ride all amused her.

"Please, sugar, don't. Pretty please."

But she had decided, and as she drove past Bountiful, past Ogden, up to the turnoff, the one at the sign that said to use this exit for the Golden Spike National Monument, she allowed a doubt to grow from seed to fruition. Why was Jason so insistent she not go to the cabin? Was there something there he didn't want her to see? Had he been using it for some purpose other than the romantic weekends they had purchased it for? They hadn't been there since the weekend before Christmas, and they hadn't planned to return until late spring. But had Jason been there? Certainly it was close enough to go and come back in the same day. On a day he claimed to be tied up with clients, tied up preparing depositions, tied up in court, tied up with this excuse, tied up with that excuse. She seethed. What would she find? She knew, she absolutely knew, she would find something.

The last twenty miles across the salt flats tightened the muscles in her upper chest; they curled her fingers so tightly around the steering wheel her knuckles whitened; they stiffened her jaw so thoroughly she felt the advent of a headache.

Beyond the paved road, beyond the end of the gravel road, beyond the ruts-without-a-road last quarter-mile to the cabin; she pulled to within feet of the front door. She felt propelled from the Jaguar and allowed her hands to stumble as she tried to fit the key into the lock. She forced herself to stop, to straighten her shoulders, to—as calmly as she was capable—insert the key.

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She stood at the now open doorway and realized with a small bit of shock that she was surprised to see everything in place, to see no immediate evidence of anyone having been there without her knowledge.

But she shook that notion from her mind. She would search and she would find something. She went to the kitchen. No dishes on the table or counter. All put away as she always put them away. But wait, she opened a cupboard, and then another, and still another. Finally, in the fourth and final cupboard, she saw something, something she knew would be there; only the specifics need be discovered when you possess certainty, she told herself. A wineglass, a too-thick-for-fragile wineglass, a kelly green, short-stemmed glass, the kind she, Kaylene, had never taken a drink from, had a nearly invisible tracing of lipstick. She took it to the window where she held it between her eyes and the brightness of the desert day. Lipstick, all right; a redness much darker than she had ever or would ever wear. And—what fools—in the bottom-most interior of the glass something red. Dried and caked. A dark red, a burgundy red. Burgundy. Kaylene always washed glasses to clarity before putting them away, a concession to TV-commercial domesticity. In the sink she washed off the lipstick, washed out the dried wine, and returned the glass to the cupboard.

She went to the bedroom. The antique dresser—the one they brought back from Bavaria, the one with five drawers, each with a separate lock that required a separate key, a kind they had never seen in America—stood before her, its chocolate wood glimmering in the late morning sunlight. She had four keys, and Jason had four keys, and that was one of the games they played, for they shared only three drawers and each had a secret drawer, a drawer the other could not get into. She kept what she called girlie things in her secret drawer. Perfumes and black-lace clothing and glittering nail polishes. She never allowed Jason to see into her drawer; that was the game. And Kaylene had never seen the inside of Jason's secret drawer.

But that was before she knew—absolutely knew—about the affair. She took a nail file from her purse: The drawers might each have separate locks, but those locks were, after all, flimsy. How easily the tiny lock mechanism moved with slight prodding. She pulled the drawer open. Perfumes, women's lacy red undergarments, letters neatly stacked in a corner, men's jewelry she had never seen before, a book. She lifted the book: *Two in Love: An*

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Anthology of Poetry for Young-at-Heart Couples. She opened it and saw an inscription: "To my darling Jason with twice the love any other woman could possibly give, I give my heart, Dial." *Dial?* Kaylene didn't know any Dial. But, of course, Jason was discreet and wouldn't have an affair with someone they both knew. In the drawer were high heels; Kaylene had not worn high heels since she was a teen, and never again would. They made her calves hurt so. The high heels were the exact same color as the undergarments. She lifted out the undergarments. Bright red, almost fire-engine red, skimpy, revealing to the point of obscenity; Kaylene had once told Jason obscenity can never be attractive, there must always be a veneer of intrigue. The undergarments were proof, if proof was needed, that the woman Jason was fooling around with, this Dial, was a hussy. Who else would wear such garments? Garments? These were not garments, they were . . . gear. Even the ankle-length nightgown seemed obscene to Kaylene. She sniffed the perfume. The bottle said Enticementa. Cheap in name, cheap in fragrance, the perfume of a hussy.

She took out the letters. "Darling Jason," one started, "I'll meet you at the cabin on Thursday." The letter was dated more than a year earlier. They were all short letters, they were all promises to meet Jason at the cabin, they were all slightly scented with Enticementa, they were all signed Dial. The last one was dated only a month earlier: "I love arriving at the cabin ahead of you, preparing myself, waiting for you, seeing the excitement on your face when you see me as you come through the door."

Kaylene knew now what she would do. Everything just fell into place. She needed only patience. She needed only to find out what day Dial the hussy would next be at the cabin. Every day she waited for hints from Jason. One day he said he would meet Kaylene for lunch at Frugles. That couldn't be the day. Another, he said he would be home early. Still another he slept late and went in to work just before noon. But the day came, a sunny, warm, frivolous day; he was up early, showered and dressed quickly, skipped breakfast, kissed Kaylene uninterestedly while she peered up from bed, and said, "I have a very long day today; I'll be tied up all day in conferences and you won't be able to reach me. Don't expect me home until late. I'm not sure what time."

Kaylene dressed without bothering to shower and for the first time in months did not have even orange juice for breakfast. She drove to I-15 and sped north. She called Jason's secretary and

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asked to speak to him, and when she heard his voice the surprise that engulfed her vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She had called just to check, just to prove he was lying, but—of course—it was all part of his plan: He was creating a cover, and that was to her advantage; she would get to the cabin before him; before, she hoped, Dial. "I was just wondering, darling cakes, if you might be able to swing free for lunch, at the Green Parrot perhaps."

"Oh, sweetie toes, I wish I could, but I really am committed all day long. How about tomorrow?"

They kissed on the phone. So, he had his alibi, and that was fine with Kaylene; just dandy.

The heat of the salt flats matched the boil of Kaylene's emotions. Dial. Today she would see the hussy. Today she would kill the hussy.

She parked on the north side of the cabin; no one would see the Jaguar from the south—the only—approach. She took in the bag of items she had purchased from the ancient man in Indiantown. She needed only one item from it. On the kitchen counter she grated the radishlike bulb. With a paring knife she cut any pieces big enough to cut. She put the gratings into the electric coffee grinder, set it to the finest setting, and turned it on. The result was a dull-red powder that might pass as cinnamon to the careless observer. Then she placed the powder in a wineglass, a clear glass with a long, fragile black stem. She took burgundy from the wine rack—Jason always kept burgundy in the rack—and filled the glass. With a spoon she stirred the burgundy and powder. The powder swirled with the motion of the stirring, and when the burgundy settled, its clear redness was clouded. Too clouded. It looked funny. Funny enough to make someone hesitate in drinking it. She opened the cupboard, looking for another glass, and spotted the green thick one that had helped convince her, if she needed any help, that Jason was having an affair. She poured the burgundy into the green glass. It did not quite fill the glass, so she poured in a touch more burgundy. She stirred again. When the whirling stopped, she examined the contents. The darkness of the glass hid the cloudiness. She watched to see if the particles would settle. After a minute, after two minutes, they had not.

She wrote a note on the pink, heart-shaped pad she so loved to write notes to Jason on. But this one was to Dial. "Darlingness Dial, I arrived before you but had to drive back to Brigham City to pick up some things. While I was here I drank a full glass of bur-

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gundy to our love. Please drink too, from the glass of burgundy I have left for you, and toast our love. Drink as I drank, in one slow continuous swallow, not allowing a single drop to remain in the glass. All my love, Jason."

Then she went into the bedroom. She emptied Jason's secret drawer and placed some of her own clothing in it. If the police were to investigate, she didn't want any evidence that Dial had been there before. Dial's death would look as if she had been picked up by Jason and had died of a heart attack while doing something too strenuous. The death of a hussy. The death she deserved. Kaylene put Dial's clothing and other items in a Smith's brown grocery bag and took the bag to her Jaguar.

She decided to make her call from the car phone. From the good cellular phone, not the cheap one in the cabin. She spoke first to the secretary, then her husband was on the line. "Oh, darling, I'm so happy I was able to get hold of you. I thought you might have left the office or something."

"I was just on my way out the door, actually, sweetie pie. I'll be out of the office all the rest of the day."

Of course. "I just wanted to tell you something, sugar lips."

"What's that, my joy?"

"I know about Dial."

A long pause. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, love of my life, I am at the cabin, and I know Dial is on her way here today, and I'm ready for her."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, oh my Romeo, that I've prepared for her. You didn't think I knew about Dial? You didn't think I would ever find out about her?"

He laughed; a fake giggle, she thought. "Of course you know Dial." His laugh to her seemed very nervous. "I know you met Dial. I know that."

"Oh no, darling. Listen, once this is over, we'll just pretend there never was a Dial. I don't think the police will ever even have to know about Dial. This cabin is so isolated, taking care of things will . . ."

"When what is over?"

"When the hussy drinks the wine."

"Darling, please try to make sense. You sound so distant, like you do sometimes. I can't make sense out of what you're saying."

"Let me explain. I purchased yellow Monkshade the other day,

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and I put it in a glass of burgundy, and I am certain your little hussy will drink it."

"What's moonshade?"

"*Monk*shade, my love, *monk*shade. In sufficient quantity to bring on respiratory failure just a few minutes after it's consumed. It will be painful, but only for a few moments. I don't want the hussy to suffer. I'm not a cruel woman, you know."

"You have poison?"

"Just a toast for your, shall we say, 'friend' to drink. I'm sure Dial will drink it. I wrote what I must confess was a very clever note to convince her."

"Oh my God. Don't drink it. Don't you understand, it's just one of the games we play, just one of the . . ."

But Kaylene was no longer listening. She heard just words, no meanings. As she talked, she changed her clothes. She stood in the bright desert sun, taking off her hot clothes, putting on cooler, more comfortable, more enticing clothes. She would be ready for Jason when he arrived. She would prove to him that everything would be all right. All right without the hussy in their lives.

Jason was still speaking his words without meanings, speaking with great urgency and confusion and fear.

"I must go now, darling," his lover said. "Please do hurry here so we can dispose of what we have to dispose of and still have time for each other, for one of our games." He seemed then to be screaming, but his lover, despite everything, had confidence in his love for her. "I must go now," she said. And she pushed the button that broke the connection. She reached through the open window and placed the telephone in its cradle, stood erect and ran her palms down her sides.

She loved the way she always looked in the long, form-fitting, fire-engine red nightgown, especially the way her high heels accentuated the shape of her body. She walked into the cabin, to the kitchen, and saw a glass of wine sitting on top of a heart-shaped note. She read the note and thought, How sweet Jason is. Of course she would toast him. From somewhere, perhaps from outside, she heard the beeping of a telephone. It sounded like one of those cellular phones; what an annoying sound they make. She lifted the green wineglass: what a lovely shade when filled with burgundy. "To my love." She smiled a smile of full happiness. How she loved Jason. "I love you with the love of two women," she said. As the note commanded, Dial drank in one long continuous swalow.

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Art by Darryl Elliott

DROWNED OPHELIA

by Gillian Linscott

"Driven. That's why I had to steal her."

She tried to raise her head to look at the oil painting on its easel. Kydd swore and told her to keep still so she put her head back where it was supposed to be, hanging over the edge of the divan, arm limp beside it, long fair hair hanging down.

"Your hair's getting dry again."

He picked up a jar of painty water and casually sloshed it over her head and neck. The paint smell stung her nostrils and trails of diluted sludge and oxblood trickled down her bare arm.

"Stop fidgeting. What do you think happened to her if she messed him about like you do?"

"What?"

"He'd hit her, then throw her out in the gutter where she'd starve. No nice comfortable home to go back to for her."

"I haven't got a nice comfortable home to go back to either."

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Parents' house in Beaconsfield, bedroom with its pictures of ponies and Beatles, were a world away. Not that she could get him to believe that.

"Whores, hookers, that's who they'd get for models. Only ones who'd take off their clothes."

Her bare buttocks, upturned on the divan, felt goose-pimpled with cold. A few hundred yards away April sun was shining on the King's Road, but the warmth of it didn't penetrate to the cluttered cube of Kydd's small studio. She stood it for another ten minutes before pleading for a cigarette which he grudgingly allowed on the grounds that his fingers were getting stiff. They sat side by side on the divan while he lit cigarettes for both of them. Apart from the divan and the battered dining table that held his painting things, the only furniture in the room consisted of two easels. One held the painting on which Kydd was working. The painting on the other, with its glowing oil colours and ornate gold frame, seemed as out of place as a peacock in a chicken run.

"Driven. He wasn't like the rest of the bloody interior decorators, scared of himself, scared of sex. Look at her."

For the hundredth time, as her cigarette smoke curled up, she looked at the girl in the gilt frame, lying in the same position as hers on the divan. But this girl was on a grassy riverbank. Her trailing fingers just touched the water, making little painted eddies, and her fair hair trailed like waterweed. And yet there was nothing of prettiness about the pose or the way it was painted. The figure was as pale as a thing that had never seen light, the slackness of it terrible. The brightness and clarity of the grass it was lying on and the flowers crushed sideways by its weight made the

Gillian Linscott is primarily an author of historical mysteries. (See *An Easy Day for a Lady* St. Martin's Press.) When asked recently why she chose the era of the suffragette movement in England for her book-length mystery fiction, she replied that that fragment of the past was still accessible to her in early life through the memories of elder members of her family. This time out she writes of the sixties, a decade she knows firsthand.

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effect worse by their contrast. Even without knowing her story, you were sure that she wouldn't move again.

"*Ophelia Drowned* — and a real kick in the balls for Millais." Pinned to the top of Kydd's easel was a reproduction of Millais's more famous painting of the same subject, torn from a book that the local public library had given up hope of seeing again. He kept it there because he hated it, and that hatred would be a deliberate part of his own picture.

"Look at the Millais. Miss Wet T-Shirt Eighteen Fifty-Something. A schoolgirl's dream of sex, comfortably on her back, pretending to drown with everything flowery and pretty."

Long ago, weeks ago, before she'd met Kydd, the girl had liked the Millais picture: poor love-lost Ophelia floating among her flowers, long skirts merging into water and petals. She knew better now, but although she was making progress towards hating Millais, she couldn't yet begin to like this picture by his contemporary and rival of Ophelia a few minutes after they'd pulled her out of the river. Kydd guessed that, and it annoyed him.

"You know why you don't understand that one? Because you're scared of it, and that's because you're scared of sex."

She protested. Her education in that respect over the past few weeks had progressed at least as fast as her art appreciation and she felt Kydd should have known that.

"Yes you are. You're like all middle-class Englishwomen. You're scared of abandonment, of letting go. That's the point of *Drowned Ophelia*. She's given everything sexually, taken everything. Drained and drowned."

"Drained and drowned and dead."

Her own voice, floating up with the cigarette smoke, sounded so sad that she felt tears coming to her eyes. To distract him, she asked: "What was her name?"

"Whose name?"

"The model's."

"I don't suppose he ever knew her name. It didn't matter anyway."

"It mattered to her. If you don't know her name, how do you know she was a tart?"

"I told you, they mostly were. Want to see what I've done?"

He wasn't one of those artists who were reluctant to discuss work in progress. She saw herself on his canvas in the same pose as the woman in the picture but painted in harsher colours with deliberately raw, angry-looking brush strokes. The flowers on the

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bank had become squashed tins and torn newspapers in an expanse of mud.

"Why have you left that bit blank?"

"That's where Mr. Millais is going—and a few other things. It will be part painting, part collage. Mixed media. I'm calling it *Homage to Jones.*"

"Why Jones?"

"Theophilus Jones. He's the one who painted my *Drowned Ophelia.*"

"I've never heard of him before."

It seemed a little unfair to her that the artist should have a name and the model not, but she didn't want to risk his sarcasm by saying so.

"Of course you haven't. That's because he was a rebel. He disturbed people instead of making them all sentimental and comfortable, so the Establishment tried to blot him out."

"What will happen to it when you've finished with it?"

He stared at her.

"The Jones. Will you give it back to the gallery?"

"Of course not. The gallery had no right to it in the first place."

"But if . . ."

"A picture belongs to whoever appreciates it most, so that one belongs to me. Do you think the sort of rich half-wits that place gets as customers have more right to it than a creative artist?"

"No, of course not."

She could see that, but the Beaconsfield idea that you didn't take without paying dragged at her like chewing gum on a sandal sole.

"But won't they have called the police in?"

"Simon will cover up for me."

Simon, Kydd's friend from art-school days, worked for the gallery that had been deprived of its Jones Ophelia.

"Simon knows you took it?"

Kydd got up and grinned at her over his shoulder.

"Simon was there when I took it. He pretended I was one of the porters and held the door for me."

"Really?"

"He knows I'm worth it."

There was a swagger in the way he said it that she wasn't meant to miss. "Do you think Simon fancies you?"

"Why not? Come on, woman, we've got work to do."

Obediently, she lay facedown on the divan and his hands moved

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firmly over her buttocks, thighs, calves, moulding them to the curves of the woman in the picture.

By six o'clock the light had changed and Kydd was tired. He decided to go for a drink. She could come with him if she liked, but she wanted to wash the paint out of her hair before the two civil servants who shared the bathroom came home. She was sitting on the divan drying it with the one fairly clean towel when the doorbell rang, and there was Simon standing on the step.

"Good evening, Judy. Is himself in?"

She was very conscious of her wet hair in its towelling turban, her bare feet and legs, feeling less clothed than she'd been all day while modelling for Kydd. Simon disturbed her. It might have been his conventionally good looks, his lack of success in hiding his public-school accent, or the fact that he still wore suits. But she knew it was more than that. The thought of what he and Kydd might do in bed, and whether they really did it, kept breaking in and made her feel awkward with him. She told him Kydd was at the pub. He smiled and suggested that they should go together and look for him.

"All right, but I've got to finish drying my hair first."

She sat on the divan and towelled at it, practising the way models managed with Mary Quant skirts, knees locked together, lower legs splayed.

"Drained and drowned."

"What?"

Simon had been standing with his back to her, looking at the Theophilus Jones. He sounded surprised and amused. She wished she hadn't said it.

"That's what Kydd says she is, the girl in the picture."

"Meg."

She dropped the towel and stared. "He said nobody knew her name."

"I don't know her surname yet. Meg was what they called her in the studio."

"How do you know?"

She was alarmed, as if at some kind of black magic.

"I've been doing research on Theophilus Jones. There's very little we know about him, but a man he shared a studio with kept a journal around the time he was painting the Ophelia picture. Their favourite model was a girl called Meg."

"Was she a prostitute?"

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He seemed puzzled.

"Not as far as I know. They found her working in a bakery."

Long ago, three or four years ago, she'd walked past a bakery every day on her way to school. On cold winter days especially she'd looked forward to the waft of warm air from it, the disturbing animal whiff of yeast. In summer, when the doors were open, she'd sometimes glimpse plump-armed, flour-dusted women pummelling mounds of dough. The memory of it must have shown as regret on her face.

"What's up? Did you want her to be a prostitute?"

She shook her head, not able to explain the shock of distance between that memory of warmth and the cold curves in the picture. Instead: "Kydd says Theophilus Jones was a rebel."

"He got that from me. He didn't know anything about Jones until I told him. He was incurably quarrelsome. He shared most of the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites but he seems to have managed to quarrel with the lot of them, Morris, Rossetti, especially Millais."

"Kydd says he's a better painter than Millais."

He looked at her and shook his head slowly. She was convinced from the way he looked at her that it wasn't true and was relieved that Kydd could be wrong about something.

"But he was a good painter?"

Too much of her life was bound up in the picture Kydd was painting to want him to be wrong entirely.

"He was an interesting painter. Neglected, so far, partly because so little is known about him and not many of his pictures seem to have survived. That's why the gallery has asked me to do some research on him. A few more biographical details would help create a market, even flush out more pictures."

"Is it valuable?"

Her question would have annoyed Kydd. Simon took it at face value. "We're hoping it may make fifty thousand. Perhaps more."

"But they can't sell it now, can they? Kydd's stolen it."

Simon laughed. She insisted: "He said you helped him. He pretended to be a porter and you let him carry it out."

In her puzzlement she forgot about her legs and sprawled across the divan. He was still laughing.

"I'm sorry to spoil the story, but I'm afraid it's not that dramatic. Kydd put a large deposit on it, by cheque."

"What?"

"A cheque that I knew very well would bounce higher than Big

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Ben. I discussed it with my bosses and they decided to overlook it —for a week or two."

"And let Kydd keep Ophelia?"

"Only until his own picture's finished." He turned again to look at Kydd's *Homage to Jones*.

"It's coming on, but it's not there yet."

"Not there?"

"It's an interesting idea, but he hasn't come to grips with it yet, has he? He's a touch scared of it."

She gathered herself up and started to comb her long, damp hair. It was a new view of Kydd he was showing her and she needed time to think about it.

"He doesn't seem scared, not while he's working on it."

"Oh, but he is. I've known him for quite a long time, you see." It wasn't said unkindly. He didn't add: "And you've known him for two and a half weeks." But then, he didn't need to.

As they were walking to the pub, her hair hanging in two damp and equal swathes over her breasts, she asked: "Will he have to give Ophelia back then?"

"In due course."

"And they won't tell the police about the cheque?"

"No, I think we can come to some arrangement in everybody's interest."

"Kydd won't think so. He says all dealers and gallery owners are bloodsuckers."

"Oh, but we are. There'll be no unpleasantness—provided he agrees to sell his own pictures through us."

"The Ophelia picture as well?"

She just stopped herself saying: "My picture."

"Yes, if it turns out the way I hope it will. We might even give him a little exhibition to himself, with the Jones picture and the *Homage* hung side by side. That's what I'm hoping, anyway."

She glanced up at his face and saw the same avid, remote look on it that Kydd had when he was painting hard.

"So you think Kydd's going to be famous?"

"Kydd will be all right if he lets us handle him properly."

She thought about this talk with Simon through the difficult weeks that followed, when the room turned hot and stuffy and Kydd wrestled with the painting, bad-tempered and not talking much. Once he disappeared for two days. She went flying round

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his usual haunts looking for him, questioned his friends. He came back filthy, his clothes smelling of sweat and beer, and shouted at her because she'd been worried about him. Then he painted furiously for hours on end, shouting at the picture because it wouldn't go as he wanted, and her because she wouldn't keep still enough. Through this time she hugged to herself the thought that he was a real painter and there'd be an exhibition. Although she knew he'd be furious if he guessed, she couldn't help dreaming that there might be a newspaper picture of herself at the exhibition opening, wineglass in hand, hair shining.

From time to time Simon visited them with bottles of beer in carrier bags. He'd look at the *Homage* and other half-completed works and talk to Kydd in painter's language that she only partly understood as she lay head-down between them on the divan. Once he asked Kydd when he thought *Homage* would be finished and Kydd swore at him. He'd already scraped it down and started again several times over. Later that evening, by way of apology, Kydd told Simon to stay while he went out for more beer. It was an evening when she felt depressed and headachy, period on the way and beer sour in her stomach.

"I don't think it's going well, is it?"

"On the contrary, it's going very well. He's getting closer to what he's trying to do, much closer."

"But he's so angry all the time."

"With Kydd that's a good sign."

He watched while she dried her hair on a towel so paint-smeared it had lost its original colour. She didn't shampoo it every day now. No point.

"Have you found out any more about Theophilus Jones?"

"A bit. He stole money from his father and he was on drugs."

She turned to look at the familiar curves of his Ophelia, the carefully painted crushed flowers.

"What sort of drugs?"

"Laudanum. That's opium. Some of the Victorians drank it by the pint."

"Is that in his friend's diary?"

"I've managed to turn up a few letters. I might get my hands on some more tomorrow if I'm lucky. I've heard there are some in a private library near Guildford. The owner wasn't keen on letting me see them, but I think I've managed to persuade him."

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"Was there anything in the letters you've seen about Meg?" He looked puzzled for a moment.

"Oh, their model. No, nothing.",

Much later, when they'd drunk the beer and a bottle of Spanish wine, Kydd hit her. Simon was still there when it happened. He and Kydd had been having an argument about landscapes. As they got drunker, Simon became more precise and academic, Kydd more abusive. She was less drunk than they were, but the wine gave her confidence to grab at the flying edge of their argument and come in on Simon's side, as far as she understood it. She said Constable's skies were great. Kydd asked her what she knew about anything and hit her quite hard on the cheek, not exactly a punch but harder than a slap.

She looked at him for long seconds, not understanding what had happened to her, then collapsed facedown on the divan and was sick. Simon called Kydd a barbarian.

"She's all right," Kydd said. "You're all right, aren't you?"

But when he saw she'd been sick and was crying he became remorseful, sat down beside her and stroked her shoulders, murmuring endearments, begging her to be all right. Simon stood watching them with a look of disgust. "You'd better clean up," he said to Kydd.

Contrite and sobered, Kydd went to the bathroom to fetch bowl and cloth.

"You should stay with him," Simon said over her bent head. "He needs you."

She stayed. The next day Kydd painted like a tempest, occasionally cursing the picture but mostly working in silence, apart from outbursts of the tuneless humming that meant things were going well. The bruise on her cheek made it hard for her to keep her head the way it was supposed to be, but she managed it. When the light was no good for painting, he noticed the bruise, now showing plum-coloured.

"Did I do that?"

She nodded.

"Oh shit."

It mattered that he'd apologised. That night he took her out to an Italian place and when they got back they made love on the divan for a long time.

They overslept next day and he started late. It put him in a bad

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mood. There was no humming that day. He kept scraping down parts of the picture, throwing paint rags or brushes into the corners of the studio, shouting at her to keep still. The change of light didn't seem to bother him for once. He painted on and on into the evening, still working hard but seeming calmer, more absorbed. Once when she asked him if she could get up because her shoulder was stiff he asked her, quite gently by his standards, to hold it for another minute or two.

"It's nearly there. It's nearly coming right."

But an hour later he still wouldn't let her get up and he'd begun cursing again. The cramp in her shoulder was unbearable.

"I'm sorry, I've just got to . . ."

"Don't move. Don't move, you silly cow."

He rushed across the room and knelt over her on the divan, making it quiver from his weight, and jabbed the end of his paintbrush into her shoulder time after time.

"It's all your fault, you bitch. You won't let me finish it."

She cried out in pain and protest and tried to wriggle away from him, but that only made it worse. He threw down the brush and twined his fingers in her hair.

"You won't let me finish it." He kept howling it, tears running down his cheeks, his clutch on her hair tightening.

She shouted: "Let me go. Let me go." Once she'd started shouting she couldn't stop and was terrified at the sound of her own voice, high and hysterical.

"Be quiet, be quiet, be quiet."

She felt his hands closing round her throat, paint-slippery and tentative at first, then harder and harder as she went on shouting, cutting off her breath until the shrillness changed to rasping as her lungs wrenched for air.

"Kydd, let her go. For God's sake let her go."

Her eyes had gone dark. She was aware only of Simon's voice from the door, then something thudding onto the divan beside them, the grip on her throat released, and air dragging its way painfully into her lungs. There was scuffling, then Kydd's voice, high and keening: "Didn't mean to. Didn't mean to."

Something damp on her forehead, an arm supporting her, and Simon's voice again.

"You'll be all right in a moment."

He was panting, but it was still a cool voice, like a doctor's. He held her until she could sit up on her own and the trembling had almost stopped. All the time Kydd was slumped in a corner crying.

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He was still there when she and Simon left together. Her legs were unsteady so Simon helped her down the stairs and into a taxi. She had to wait there, under the curious eyes of the taxi driver, while he went back upstairs to collect the Theophilus Jones Ophelia.

He found her a bed for the night, on the living room couch of a woman he knew in Kensington. Next day, around midday, he called for her. She'd managed to make herself some coffee, but her throat was too sore to swallow more than a few sips of it.

"He was going to kill me," she said.

Simon nodded, looking down at his feet.

"What will happen to him?"

She'd been awake most of the night, partly from her own pain and fear, partly imagining Kydd in a police cell.

"I went to his studio this morning. He's gone. He'll lie low for a few days then come back as if nothing happened."

She didn't want him in a cell, and yet it was part of the horror for her that he'd done this, and the skies weren't falling.

"I'm not going back to him."

"No, of course not. Is there anywhere else you can stay?"

There were two friends at the further end of Fulham she thought might let her share and Simon said he'd take her there in a taxi, but he didn't hurry to call one.

"I told you I was going to look for some more letters."

She nodded. She didn't want to think about it.

"You asked me about their model, Meg."

The memory of a warm bread smell came to her, and a longing to be home. "Meg from the bakery."

"Yes." He hesitated. "I'm afraid it didn't end well."

He waited for her to ask what happened. When she didn't, he sat down on the end of the couch, not looking at her.

"The man he shared the studio with, the man who wrote the letters, went away into the country for a few days. He left Theophilus Jones in the studio, working on the Ophelia, with Meg coming in every day to model."

She said nothing, just clutched the coffee mug to her chest, protecting the warmth of it.

"The friend came back after three days. I'm afraid . . . he found her. Found poor Meg's body, naked on the couch where she'd been posing. Theophilus had killed her."

"Strangled her?"

"Yes. He'd strangled her."

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A long silence. She drank coffee, looked at him.

"And he'd finished the picture?"

"Yes. Look, this will probably strike you as the worst part, but you'd better know. When the friend came in, touches of the paint were still wet. He thought Theophilus might have heard him coming upstairs and climbed out of a window. But poor Meg had been dead for some time. Her body was cold."

"So he'd killed her and gone on painting her?"

"Yes."

"What happened to Theophilus?"

"They found him asleep by the river, near Chelsea Bridge. He never denied what he'd done. They tried him and hanged him."

In the taxi she said: "What will happen about the Jones picture? I don't suppose anybody will want to buy it, now you've found out the story."

He'd recovered some of his poise by then. "On the contrary, it will probably put twenty thousand on the price."

"What about Kydd's picture?"

"He hasn't finished it."

"He won't now, will he?"

"No, he won't finish it now." And for her the regret on his face—hidden immediately by his civilised concern for her and crushed down firmly in his own mind as soon as it sprang up—the fleeting regret that he hadn't arrived a few hours later, was the coldest thing of all. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

G	A	L	L	■	C	O	A	T	S	■	C	O	I	N
A	M	O	I	■	A	C	C	R	A	■	E	S	T	A
L	I	O	N	I	N	T	H	E	V	A	L	L	E	Y
A	S	S	E	T	■	■	E	N	A	C	T	O	R	S
■	■	■	S	A	L	A	■	T	N	T	■	■	■	■
C	A	T	■	L	I	S	T	■	T	I	T	L	E	D
E	R	R	■	I	D	I	O	T	■	■	V	E	D	A
D	E	A	D	A	S	A	D	I	N	O	S	A	U	R
E	N	I	D	■	■	N	I	N	E	R	■	D	C	I
D	A	T	E	R	S	■	E	T	N	A	■	S	E	C
■	■	■	■	E	T	A	■	S	E	T	S	■	■	■
S	T	R	I	D	E	N	T	■	■	O	A	S	E	S
T	H	E	M	O	N	K	E	Y	W	R	E	N	C	H
L	E	D	A	■	C	L	E	A	R	■	P	A	T	E
O	M	E	N	■	H	E	N	R	Y	■	E	G	O	S

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Art by Darryl Elliott

ANIMAL RITES

by Doug Allyn

"Hi, Dr. Westbrook. I'm Karen Cohen, TV 17 News. I'll be your moderator this evening. Could you take your seat at the table, please? We go live on the air in three minutes."

"We who are about to die salute you," David said grimly.

"It won't be that bad," she said, with a plastic smile. She was shorter than she appeared to be on television, five-two or so. Her sharply angular face was more forceful than attractive and her apparently casual hairdo was sprayed hard as a helmet. Navy blue suit, pearls, all business. David followed her to the interview set, wondering why he'd let himself be talked into this.

Two of the panelists were already seated: Helena Massey, the silver-maned president of the local Humane Society. Tanned and taut, Helena was wearing a simple red and white print dress that probably cost more than David's veterinary practice earned in a month. He didn't recognize her companion, a younger man, pale

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and intense, wearing a green corduroy jacket, no tie. Their heads were close together, voices low, expressions earnest. They looked as if they were plotting to overthrow the tsar.

Three chairs were still empty. David spotted Hutch Jaeger pacing at the back of the studio. The older man was wearing his usual rumpled khakis, an unlit briar pipe clamped firmly in the corner of his mouth. As chairman of the Algoma Sportsmen's Club, Hutch was a spokesman for local hunters. A reluctant one. He was soft-spoken by nature, and these debates usually turned into screaming matches. He looked pallid. Probably stage fright.

Musician/writer Doug Allyn tied for first place in the 1995 Readers Award with a story featuring crime-solving vet Dr. David Westbrook. Westbrook returns this month to find not only murder but a hot political potato on his plate. Several of Mr. Allyn's stories for *EQMM* have been turned into books; we don't know yet whether the author has such plans for the Westbrook stories but we'll keep you informed.

The television studio was a crude affair. Three small sets were positioned around a central camera island, a weather set complete with maps, the news desk, and the personal interview set, which consisted of a round table in front of a faux-bookcase wall. Beyond the backdrops, no effort had been made to disguise the concrete-block walls. Welcome to small-town broadcasting.

There was a bustle in the corner of the room as the last two panelists swept in. Randy Castle and his wife, Ilena, pop singers who owned a vacation home in Algoma. They'd only recently taken up the cause of hunters' rights, but they were photogenic and even with their careers on the wane, their appearance would boost the local station ratings.

They were a striking couple. Randy was an all-American boy, Huck Finn grin, shaggy red hair and freckles. Ilena was the ultimate trophy wife, a green-eyed blonde with Vegas hair and a drop-dead figure. Both of them were wearing full-length fur coats, mink for Ilena, wolf for Randy. The coats had the desired effect. Helena

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Massey and friend looked as if they'd been jabbed with a cattle prod. Both of them were seething.

The Castles had a final word with a blue-suited bodyguard type who'd accompanied them, then took their places at the table.

"Good, everyone's here and we have one minute to airtime," Karen Cohen said as Hutch Jaeger reluctantly eased into his seat. "Here's a quick rundown of our format. The subject will be animal rights versus hunting. Dr. Westbrook, why don't you begin by outlining the situation here in Algoma and I'll pick it up from there."

First! Damn! Before David could protest, the theme music was already coming up, the floodlights brightened, and Karen was smiling into the camera.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to a News Channel 17 special edition of Open Forum. I'm Karen Cohen, your host. As most of you know, the annual deer season opens next week in northern Michigan. Nearly three-quarters of a million hunters will participate, but not everyone agrees that hunting is a legitimate sport, and some feel it should be banned altogether. What do you think?

"The members of our panel tonight are all Algoma residents, though Randy Castle and his wife Ilena might be better known for their hit songs than their sportsmanship. . . ."

She ran through the list quickly. Too quickly to suit David. Helena's pal in the corduroy jacket was an animal rights activist from Detroit named Jerry Feicke. He was chafing at the bit, as eager to debate as Hutch Jaeger was reluctant. The Castles' fur coats had obviously tripped his trigger. . . .

David heard his name, Karen was smiling at him expectantly, and suddenly he was staring into the camera's unblinking eye.

"Actually, I'm neutral in this debate," David said, swallowing. "As a veterinarian, I spend my time patching animals up, so I'm personally not a hunter. But from an ecological point of view, since we've all but eliminated the wolf and coyote populations in Michigan, there are no natural checks on the whitetail deer herds anymore, unless you count automobiles. Last year nearly forty thousand deer and five people died in collisions. So while I'm not a fan of hunting, when it comes to animal population control, it's the only game in town, no pun intended."

"And yet, many people feel that hunting is far more than a sport," Karen said smoothly, calling on Hutch Jaeger next. The older man began a halting, passionate paean to the history of the

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hunt. He was talking about the discovery of the five-thousand-year-old mummy of a prehistoric hunter in a Swiss glacier when he coughed and seemed to falter. Feicke seized the opening, launching into a tirade before Hutch could recover.

David listened to Feicke for a moment, then tuned him out. He sympathized with the animal rights cause, but urban zealots like Feicke left him cold. When David assisted at the birth of a calf, he knew that neither the cow nor her offspring were likely to die of old age, and the ways of the wild were harsher still. There are no retirement homes in the forest.

He sized Feicke up as a professional speaker imported to counter the Castles' stage presence. If so, he was a poor choice. He came across as a strident know-it-all. David met Hutch Jaeger's gaze. The older man rolled his eyes and David smiled.

Feicke made a crack about the Castles' fur coats. Ilena retorted that minks were first cousins to rats, and asked if Feicke believed in rights for rats, too?

Feicke began an "all living things are sacred" speech, but he'd barely begun when Ilena Castle stood up and smiled at the camera. And uncoiled a snake from beneath her fur coat. A large snake. Nearly two meters of green boa constrictor writhing in her hands. David guessed it was either an Emerald Tree Boa or an Australian Green. Feicke froze, his eyes riveted on the snake.

"My friend Bobby the Boa eats rats for a living," Ilena said calmly, holding the squirming snake out towards Feicke, who'd gone absolutely ashen.

"Maybe you can explain to him why you want him to change his diet, Mr. Feicke? Because eating rats must violate their rights. Right?"

The room was silent as a painting. Ilena placed the snake on the table and he immediately wriggled into a defensive coil, nervously tasting the air with his flickering tongue.

"Is that snake dangerous, Dr. Westbrook?" Karen Cohen asked, through jaws that were nearly clamped shut.

"Any snake will strike if it's frightened," David began, but Feicke didn't wait for the rest. With a moan, he thrust himself back from the table, toppling over his chair in his haste to escape. He scrambled on his hands and knees across the studio. The camera followed him all the way.

"This snake seems calm enough, though," David continued. "Has he been fed recently?" No one was listening.

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"We'll—ah, we'll take a station break now," Karen said, blinking, mesmerized by the snake. "This is Open Forum and we'll be back after these—"

There was a crash from behind the set and one of the overhead floods wobbled on its stand as Feicke apparently blundered into it. Karen Cohen quickly covered her mouth. Too late. She burst out with a strangled whinny of a giggle, as much a nervous release as anything else. Her laughter was contagious, and they all broke up, even the cameraman. Well, almost everyone.

"That was despicable," Helena Massey snapped, rising. "I should have expected this kind of cheap stunt from you, Castle. But for the rest of you to laugh, just because someone's afraid of a snake? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

She unclipped her lapel mike, tossed it on the table, and stalked off.

"Mrs. Massey?" Karen called after her.

"Quit while you're ahead, lady," Randy Castle said. "That bit of theater will make every news show in the country. If you need to fill the airtime, why don't we talk about my new tour?"

"I guess we'll have to," Karen said doubtfully. "We can't very well have a debate now. Will you all remain seated, please, while I introduce the next segment? And Ilena, please put that snake away. As far away as possible, preferably." Open Forum's producer buttonholed David after the show to ask advice about a vomiting cat. David listened sympathetically but the symptoms were too vague for a diagnosis.

"Sometimes cats get upset stomachs, just like people," he said. "She'll probably be fine in a day or two. If the vomiting persists, though, bring her by the clinic and I'll take a look at her."

The Castles and their companion were already halfway across the parking lot when David stepped out of the studio. The three of them were still laughing about the prank with the snake. Which is why they didn't notice Jerry Feicke half hidden behind a parked car at the far side of the lot. As they drew abreast of him, Feicke charged at them, full tilt.

"Hey! Look out!" David yelled, sprinting towards Feicke, trying to head him off.

Too late. "Bastaaard!" Feicke screamed, swinging wildly at Randy Castle. But before he could land a blow, David tackled Feicke from the side, grabbing his knees, pulling him down. The scuffle was over in seconds. David, Castle, and the bodyguard held

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Feicke down until a studio security guard showed up, took him firmly by the arm, and ran Feicke off the lot.

"Whoa, that was more exciting than most TV debates," Randy Castle said, dusting himself off. "Are you okay, Doc?"

"No major damage," David said, more shaken than he cared to admit.

"Well, thanks for the help. What do you say we step into the pub across the parking lot for a quick pick-me-up? I'd like to talk to you anyway."

"I think I could use a bracer, at that," David said. "For medicinal purposes only, of course."

"Absolutely," Randy said, flashing a four-hundred-watt smile. "I don't think you've met my manager, Brian Benetto?"

The bodyguard type shook hands perfunctorily. Up close, he was even bigger than David had first thought, square-jawed, with a faint blue beardshadow and hard eyes. He looked like a movie mobster on steroids. "Nice to meet you, Doc. Look, Randy, you can't waste any more time here, you hafta talk to the promoters—"

"All I *have* to do is breathe, Brian," Randy said, cutting him off. "Everything else is optional. And right now I want to talk to the doc, here."

"I'll put Bobby Boa in the van," Ilena said, stepping between them to cool things. "Why don't you come with me, Brian?"

"Good idea," Randy said, his smile fading. "Babysit her, Brian. No telling how many other loonies might be hanging around. Come on, Doc, let me get you that drink."

"What did you want to talk to me about?" David asked, following Castle into the pub.

"Ilena and I are in the middle of a tour," Castle said, taking a corner booth in the shadows. "And frankly, the crowds could be better. We've always used snakes in our act, and since this animal rights thing's heated up, we've been drawing a lot of media attention doing shows like today's."

"Not quite like today's, I hope," David said.

"Wrong, today's was damn near perfect," Randy said gleefully. "That wuss falling over his chair will play on stations that wouldn't give me the time of day otherwise. I'd risk a dozen parking-lot scuffles for that kind of publicity. Thanks again for steppin' in. Maybe I can return the favor."

"How do you mean?" David asked.

"I've been thinking about maybe adding some game animals to

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our act, Doc. Z. Z. Topp toured with an honest-to-God buffalo a few years ago, and I figure a few big animals onstage might give our show some pizazz, especially if I could get 'em to react to the music somehow. I figure on using a couple of deer, maybe even an elk. What do you think?"

"Frankly, I think it's a lousy idea," David said. "Deer and elk seldom adapt very well to captivity, to say nothing of traveling. They wouldn't be suitable at all."

"Why not?" Randy said, his charm fading like a mist in sunlight.

"They're ungulates," David said. "Their reflexes are geared to running at the first hint of danger or even anything out of the ordinary. If you put them in a situation where they're agitated but unable to run, like a traveling cage, they'll destroy themselves. They'll hyperventilate until they die of stress."

"Couldn't they be drugged to keep 'em calm?"

"There are drugs that'll sedate them for a short time: Xylazine, for instance. But even drugging them for a single move entails a serious risk. You couldn't do it for a whole tour."

"So we have to replace a few of 'em. If you came along to keep 'em zonked to the gills they'd last awhile, right? I'd be willing to pay you a pretty good salary."

"A good salary for what?" Brian Benetto asked, taking the seat next to David as Ilena Castle slid into the booth beside her husband.

"The doc's gonna look after the zoo I'm planning to add to the road show," Randy said.

"A zoo? And a zookeeper?" Brian Benetto said. "Randy, are you nuts? We haven't been able to book half the dates we need to break even as it is. We can't afford to hire anybody else."

"The point's academic anyway," David said, rising. "The animals you mentioned wouldn't survive a tour, Mr. Castle. They might not survive the first move. I wouldn't take the job myself and I doubt that any other reputable vet would either."

"Get real, Doc," Randy sneered, all pretense of civility gone now. "How much money can you be makin' in a rinky-dink town like this?"

"Enough that I can tell you to stuff your offer where the sun don't shine, jack," David said evenly. "It's a bad idea. Forget it. And Mrs. Castle, you'd better be careful about overfeeding your snake. He looked sluggish and his eyes were a little dull."

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"I prefer him sluggish when I'm carrying him under my coat," she said, unoffended.

"Carrying him there isn't a good idea anyway," David said. "Snakes are carnivores, not fashion accessories. I'll skip the drink, Mr. Castle. See you around."

David spotted a client on the far side of the pub, wandered over to say hello, and stayed to chat a few minutes. On his way out, he glanced at the corner booth. Randy was gone, but Ilena and Benetto were still there, sitting close together, talking. Judging from their interlocked knees, it wasn't a business conference. More like love or a facsimile, David guessed. Life in the fast lane. Ilena glanced up and met his eyes. She smiled and pointedly caressed Brian's cheek. David waved goodbye.

"I can't believe you turned down the offer," Yvonne said, over a very late supper. David had been out until ten o'clock helping a mother Chow with a difficult delivery. They were alone now in their kitchen, just shy of midnight, lights low, Nat King Cole murmuring on the radio.

"Why? Would you want me to go?"

"Of course not, but sometimes I think you feel restless working in Algoma. Didn't it sound exciting?"

"Alligator wrestling sounds exciting. That doesn't mean I'd like to try it. Besides, from what the manager said, it sounded like a low-budget adventure anyway."

"Ilena Castle looks . . . very attractive on television."

"Benetto certainly seemed to think so."

"And you didn't?" she said carefully. Yvonne was barefoot, wearing a shapeless bathrobe and her glasses, her hair a tousled shambles. She looked utterly adorable but David knew better than to say so. Women seldom feel beautiful unless their hair is perfect and their clothes are impeccable. It's a miracle the race has survived.

"Ilena Castle is a very handsome package," David admitted. "But that's also the way she struck me. Like a commodity. A new car or a refrigerator, and about as sexy as a fiberglass mannequin. Besides, the lady wears snakeskin accessories with the snakes still aboard. I prefer my reptiles in terrariums, thank you. Or better yet, on video. And I prefer my ladies winningly rumpled. The way you look now."

"I'm rumpled, all right, which reminds me, I have a bath wait-

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ing. Turn off the lights when you're finished. We'll pick up in the morning."

"I'm finished now," he said. "But since I doubt that you'd care to bed down with someone who's spent the last four hours groveling in a kennel coaxing Chow pups into the world, I'll flip you for the bath. Unless, of course, you'd care to share."

She eyed him, her expression neutral. "I don't have a coin," she said.

"Neither have I."

"You didn't even look."

"I'm positive I don't have one. You don't think I'd lie about a thing like that, do you?"

"I would certainly hope so," she said.

So they shared the bath and made love, long and languorous. And fell asleep in each other's arms.

But sometime before dawn he jerked awake, shaken and sweating. He'd been dreaming about the death of his father ten years before. And he lay there in the dark with his love at his side. Feeling haunted and alone. And a little afraid.

Even the light of morning couldn't dispel the dream. Its shadowed images lingered like a mist. And on the way to his office, he listened to the news. And learned that Randy Castle's home had been riddled by gunfire in the night. Randy had been wounded. His manager, Brian Benetto, had been killed.

"It wasn't much of a fight, Stan," David said. "I tackled Feicke before he even landed a punch, and then Randy Castle and his manager . . . what was his name?"

"Benetto. The late Brian Benetto," Sheriff Stan Wolinski said. The two of them were alone in David's surgery. Wolinski was a cement block of a man, squarely built, with attitudes to match. His uniform and brush cut were similar shades of gray.

"Right." David nodded. "Benetto. Anyway, the three of us just held Feicke until the security guard came. It wasn't exactly World War Three."

"And Benetto didn't rough Feicke up, particularly, or have words with him?"

"No. I doubt Feicke even knew who he was. Benetto wasn't on the panel. I wasn't introduced to him until after the scuffle. Why?"

"Because Benetto's the man who got killed," Wolinski said simply. "Feicke says he was trying for Castle and Benetto must have

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caught one by accident. I have no reason to doubt that, I'm just gathering facts. Maybe you shouldn't have tackled him. If the poor bastard had landed one solid punch, his honor or whatever might've been satisfied and he wouldn't have shot up Castle's house like some gangbanger. And he wouldn't be in my slammer looking at murder one."

"There's no doubt Feicke did it?"

"He's admitted it. Hell, he seems proud of it. Turned himself in first thing this morning, and his only regret was that he'd only wounded Castle."

"Well, if you're looking for more nails to drive in his coffin, I can't help you," David said. "After the scuffle he was almost in tears. The studio rent-a-cop ran him off with no trouble. He didn't make any threats . . . Wait a minute. If he's turned himself in, what are you doing here? What's the problem?"

"A small one," Wolinski admitted. "He's confessed all right, I'm just not sure I believe him."

"Why not?"

"For openers, he's doesn't seem like the type. He's a nice kid, well educated. Still, the ugliest killing I ever saw was a sixty-year-old grandma who took a neighbor apart with a golf club."

"Okay, maybe he's not the type. What else?"

"The gun. Or rather, the lack of one. It was an automatic rifle, .223, with full metal-jacket ammunition, probably military surplus. Feicke's a little vague about the kind of gun it was. In fact, he doesn't seem to know much about guns, period."

"You don't need a college degree to pull a trigger."

"True, but he not only can't tell me what gun he used, he doesn't know where it is. He says he ditched it in the river but he's not sure where. If you're going to confess, why bother to ditch the gun? Why not just turn it in?"

"If he's shooting up people's homes, maybe he's a couple of bricks shy of a load."

"Did he seem crazy to you?"

"I'm a veterinarian, not a shrink."

"You're qualified to spot mad dogs, right? Did Feicke strike you that way?"

"If Jerry Feicke was one of my patients, he'd be a rabbit," David conceded. "No, I didn't think he was crazy. He's definitely a zealot about animal rights, though. If he'd shot Castle to prevent him from harming an animal, I might buy that."

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"Well? Was Randy Castle harming any animals?"

"Oddly enough, he was considering it. He had a cockamamie idea about working game animals into his act. Deer, or maybe an elk. He asked if I'd be interested in touring with the show to handle the animals."

"So? Were you?"

"Hell, no," David said, exasperated. "It was a crazy idea. The animals wouldn't have survived a week and I told him so."

"Could Feicke have known about these plans?"

"I doubt it. I think it was something Randy came up with on the spur of the moment. His manager was as surprised to hear about it as I was. He thought it was a lousy idea, too, but for a different reason."

"What reason?"

"Money. He said something about the tour not having enough bookings to break even. Said they couldn't afford anyone else."

"It's a moot point now. Castle's canceled the tour. In fact, with the hole he's got in his arm, he may be through touring, period."

"How badly was he wounded?"

"It didn't look like much to me. A hole in the back of his right bicep. The doc in the emergency room told me Randy was lucky Feicke used jacketed ammo. It went through clean without expanding. They were willing to release him, but Randy wanted to stay in the hospital until they can fly in a specialist to check for nerve damage. And speakin' of second opinions, I need one from you."

"On what?"

"A case like this, rock singer gettin' plugged by some guy he offends on a TV show, it's gonna draw serious media attention. My phone's already ringin' off the wall with questions from reporters."

"So? It's an open-and-shut case, isn't it?"

"It looks like it, sure."

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's two problems. And I want to be off the record here, okay? Doctor-patient relationship?"

"You hardly qualify as one of my patients."

"You know what I mean. The thing is, the emergency-room doctor told me Castle was stoned when they brought him in last night. Cocaine, he thought."

"Gee, a rock singer using drugs? I'm shocked."

"Yeah, but Castle's no ordinary singer. He's got this squeaky-

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clean outdoor image. I've never heard any local rumbles about him usin' dope, and I think my local sources are pretty good. But if he's into dope, I don't want to get blindsided. Was anything odd about his behavior yesterday? Like he was high?"

David considered the question. "No," he said slowly. "He seemed pumped, maybe a little edgy, nothing out of the ordinary."

"What do you mean, edgy?"

"He overreacted when I turned him down. Instantly nasty, when there was no reason for it. I got the impression he was feeling some pressure."

"What kind of pressure?"

"Maybe a tour that wasn't going very well. But maybe more than that. Ordinarily I wouldn't say anything about this, but since we're talking about a killing . . ."

"And I'm your patient, sort of. What is it?"

"As I was leaving the pub, I noticed Ilena Castle and Benetto sitting alone. They looked awfully cozy. Maybe it was nothing but . . ."

"But if you really thought so, you wouldn't have mentioned it, would you?"

"No, I guess not. It definitely looked like something was going on between them. But it couldn't have anything to do with what happened, right?"

"I don't see how."

"You said there were two things bothering you. Okay, Castle was stoned when they brought him in. What's the other?"

"I don't know if you'll understand this," Wolinski said, shaking his head. "You're not a hunter. I don't hunt much anymore myself. But this is huntin' country and I grew up here and took a lot of game when I was a kid. The thing is, sometimes you're making a perfect stalk on an animal; you're downwind, haven't made a sound or showed yourself. And yet suddenly that whitetail or elk or whatever will look up, right at you. Somehow it *knows* exactly where you are. It's like a voice on the wind whispered to it. Look out, pal. Something nasty's headed your way."

"What are you saying? That Castle should have sensed trouble coming because he's a hunter?"

"Maybe he did, I don't know. Maybe that's why he lived and his manager didn't. But I'm not talking about him, I'm talking about me. I'm the one who's hearing a voice on the wind. It's telling me there's something wrong about this."

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"Like what?"

"I don't know," Stan said, shrugging his massive shoulders. "It's just a feeling. A bad one. That this could blow up in my face if I'm not careful."

"If you're hearing voices, maybe you really do need a doctor."

"If I do, it won't be a vet. Thanks for your time, Doc."

The day returned to normal. Almost. David saw the usual run of patients, canine, feline, one goat with mastitis, and a lop-eared rabbit who'd been savaged by a feral cat. Two hours and forty stitches later, the rabbit was in one piece, though minus the tip of an ear.

Saving a patient usually gave David a lift, but the dark mood from his talk with Stan and the dream of his father persisted. It was probably the power of suggestion, but David could almost feel a shadow hovering near him, just out of view. Terrific. He'd be hearing Stan's voices on the wind next.

Just before closing, Bettina, his veterinary assistant, stuck her head in the surgery door. "I've got a lady out here who says she needs to see you ASAP. Says it's an emergency, but doesn't have an animal with her. Ilena Castle? Do you know her?"

"We've met. Are you sure she doesn't have an animal? She's been known to carry a snake under her fur coat."

"Trust me, this lady isn't hiding a thing under her clothes, including underwear," Bettina said drily. "Shall I send her in?"

"I'll see her in my office," David said. "All we have left are a couple of vaccinations, right? Why don't you handle them and then take off. I'll close up."

Bettina arched an eyebrow, then closed the surgery door without saying a word. Which was a considerable commentary in itself.

David went into his small office, and a moment later there was a rap on the door and Ilena Castle stepped in.

Bettina was right. Ilena wasn't concealing anything. Her ecru T-shirt fit like a snake's skin and her faded jeans seemed too tight to walk in. But she managed. Quite well, in fact.

"I'm afraid I've barged in under false pretenses," she said. "I don't have a sick animal, I'm the one with the emergency."

"No problem, I thought it might be personal. Sit down, you must've had a tough day."

"It's been grim," she admitted. She eased down into the battered

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chair beside his desk, glancing warily around as though she might take flight at any moment. "I just finished talking to Brian's parents about what happened. They were . . . Well, you can imagine."

"Actually, I'm not sure I can. What did happen, exactly? The news reports have been pretty vague."

"That crazy bastard from the TV panel shot up our home, that's what happened. He killed Brian and wounded Randy, all over that stupid prank with a snake! He must be insane."

"He may have some problems, all right," David said. "But haven't we all?"

"I certainly have my share," she said, meeting his eyes and taking a deep breath. "That's why I'm here."

"How can I help?"

"Have you, ah, talked to Randy since . . . all this happened?"

"No. Why?"

"Because you saw me with Brian yesterday, and I suppose it might have looked . . . Anyway, please don't say anything to Randy about it."

"I never intended to."

"I'm sure you didn't, I'd just feel better if I had your word."

"Of course," David said. "I doubt that I'll see your husband again in any case. We didn't exactly part friends."

"He may want to talk to you, though," she said, rising. "About the tour, I mean."

"I thought it was canceled."

"It was. But all the publicity's brought us a ton of offers. It looks like we'll be going on, only bigger and better. If you change your mind about taking the job I'll . . . see that you get your price. Anything at all."

"I won't change my mind," David said.

"Too bad," she said. "It might have been fun. Thanks for seeing me, Doc. It's been interesting." She swept out of the office like a model on a runway. A very worried model.

"Yeah," David said to the empty room. "It certainly has."

He closed the clinic, then took five minutes to pop the soft top off his Jeep and stow it in the backseat. He took the slow lane home, putzing along with the semis at fifty-five. It was a perfect autumn afternoon, warm, but with a crisp snap in the air that hinted at the chill of the coming night. The hills north and west of Algoma were showing the first dabs of color from the brush of the Master

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Painter, splashes of oaken gold, maple reds, and oranges against the loden-green background of the tall pines.

He loved the northern Michigan countryside this time of year, reveled in the colors and scents. But it held no peace for him now. There was something tugging at a corner of his consciousness, like a mosquito droning in the dark. One you know will find you eventually . . .

And he realized it was the dream. Of his father, in those last months, dying in the veterans hospital in Grand Rapids. Dying by inches. The ulcers on his legs turned septic, then gangrenous. And so they'd amputated. His left ankle first. Then his knee. Then his right ankle. Sweet Jesus. And the worst of it was that he'd scarcely known it. Alzheimer's disease had stolen most of his memory and much of his consciousness before his diabetes entered its final, lethal stage.

David and his dad had never been close, and even the stench of death in that sterile, anonymous room hadn't changed things between them. When his father was lucid, their conversations were generic: the politics of forty years ago. Or business. Or baseball. Man talk. Subjects of general interest discussed dispassionately, with no emotional involvement. And in this fashion, they both managed to avoid comment on the obvious. That the surgeons were cutting his father's legs away, and would continue to do so until . . .

God, the horror of it. He hadn't thought about it in years. Had deliberately repressed it.

And yet here it was back again in a dream. As though it had happened only yesterday. And the odd thing was, he had a definite sense that the dream was no coincidence. That somehow, something had called the memory of his father back. But why? What triggered it? He wasn't feeling lonely or maudlin. Nor was it the season for remembrance. His father had died in the spring. April. The twenty-first.

What was the old saying? Dream of the dead, hear from the living? Well, he'd certainly been hearing from the living. And the day wasn't over.

When he pulled into the driveway of the country home he shared with Yvonne, a gleaming red Jaguar was parked beside his wife's Range Rover. It looked like a car a rock star might drive. It wasn't.

Helena Massey was sitting at the kitchen table with Yvonne,

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sharing coffee and small talk. They were both wearing scuff clothes, jeans and blouses and boots. And both managed to exude elegance anyway. A valuable talent. One David admired greatly without having a clue as to how women managed it.

"Hi," he said. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Actually, Helena came by to see you," Yvonne said, giving him a peck on the cheek. "I have to see to my horse. You're sure you won't join us for dinner, Helena?"

"No, I really can't, but thank you. It was wonderful to see you again."

"You, too," Yvonne said. She winked at David as she ducked discreetly out the kitchen door.

"I'm sorry to bother you at home," Helena said. "I wanted to talk to you privately."

"No problem," David said. "What's up?"

"It's about what happened at the studio yesterday. Have you been interviewed about it yet?"

"Sheriff Wolinski talked to me this morning."

"I meant by the press. Have any reporters talked to you?"

"No, why should they?"

"I don't think you understand what's happened here, David," she said earnestly. "This will be the first major trial focused on the struggle for animal rights. No one's taken us seriously up to now, but Jerry's trial will change that. With Randy Castle involved, the trial will draw national attention. We'll be able to present the issues every single day to the world. Jerry will be the kind of symbol that James Brady was for the anti-gun movement."

"Brady? You mean the guy who was wounded with President Reagan?"

"And who went on to testify before congress and helped get meaningful gun-control legislation passed."

"Right, but James Brady was the victim, not the shooter, Helena. I doubt people will see Jerry in the same light."

"Once the American people are made aware of our viewpoint, they'll feel the same revulsion for the slaughter of animals that we do," she said doggedly. "And after the trial, Jerry will . . . Well, what really matters is that the issues will be forcefully presented."

"You may be right, Helena. I've never been much on politics. But I can't change the statement I already gave Stan Wolinski, if that's what you want."

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"I wouldn't dream of asking you to, David. Tell me, do you think I'm crazy because I believe in animal rights?"

"Of course not. I don't agree with you totally, but I'm not unsympathetic to your viewpoint."

"And Jerry? Didn't he seem rational to you? Right up until those bastards shoved that damned snake in his face?"

"I suppose so. He seemed a lot less rational in the parking lot afterward, though."

"But his behavior was certainly understandable, wasn't it? After all, he'd been provoked."

"I'm no expert on rationality, Helena. What is it you want from me?"

"Only the truth. That the trouble in the parking lot was caused, at least in part, by Castle's provocation of Jerry earlier. You can say that honestly, can't you?"

"But the parking lot scuffle is hardly the issue now."

"All I'm asking is that you don't give the press the impression that Jerry is some wild-eyed maniac. We want the media to give our cause a fair shake."

"I see," David said. "All right, I won't tell reporters that Feicke's a lunatic, if that's what you're asking. I'm not qualified to comment one way or the other anyway."

"Good," she said, rising to leave. "I knew we could count on your honesty, if not your wholehearted support, David. Perhaps that will come later. I've got to get back to the jail now. There's an evening visiting hour at seven. Tell Yvonne goodbye for me."

She swept out, obviously cheered by the conversation. Leaving David shaking his head. He took two fluted wineglasses down from the cupboard, carefully filled them both with a light chardonnay, drained one at a gulp, and refilled it.

"Has Helena driven you to drink?" Yvonne said, coming into the kitchen. "She's been known to have that effect on people."

"How do you mean?"

"She's always been a great one for causes," Yvonne said, taking a glass from him. "Her heart's in the right place, but all that earnestness can be a bit wearing sometimes."

"She's got me more confused than worn," he said. "Believing in a cause is one thing. Sacrificing people for it is another."

"Who's being sacrificed?"

"Her pal Feicke. I'm no legal expert, but he's confessed to shooting up Castle's home and killing his manager, right? So it seems

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to me his only hope is to plead insanity or something like it. And yet Helena wants me to tell people what a rational guy he is just to be sure their cause gets a fair hearing. She sees him as a martyr, for God's sake."

"Oh, I think she sees him as considerably more than that," Yvonne said. "They're lovers, you know."

"Lovers? You're kidding. She must be, what, fifteen years older than he is?"

"If their genders were reversed, you wouldn't think anything of it, and in a way, it makes perfect sense. They're both so passionate about animals, why shouldn't they feel some animal passion for each other?"

"But if she loves him, then what she just said makes even less sense."

"Maybe they think his conviction is a foregone conclusion and they're trying to salvage what they can."

"She seemed awfully cheerful for someone whose lover will be spending his happily-ever-afters in prison," David said doubtfully. "Besides, she said something . . ."

"What?"

"She was talking about James Brady, comparing Feicke to him. Saying he could be as effective for animal rights as Brady was for gun control. But Brady addressed Congress and spoke around the country. Does she think the Senate's gonna hold hearings on visiting days?"

"I don't know," Yvonne said. "I know Helena well enough not to underestimate her, though. She may be overzealous for her cause of the moment, but she's no fool."

"Right," he said, frowning, "she's not. So what's wrong with this picture? Her lover's in jail. Any publicity they get for their cause will be negated by his conviction, yet she's happy as the proverbial clam. It doesn't make sense. Unless . . ."

"What is it?"

"Unless she knows he won't be convicted."

"But he's confessed."

"So he has, but right now his confession's the only evidence against him. And Stan Wolinski has doubts about it. Feicke doesn't know anything about guns and he didn't produce the gun he said he used when he turned himself in. Okay, let's suppose he didn't ditch it? Suppose he never had it at all? Because he didn't do the shooting."

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"But if he didn't, why would he confess?"

"Well, he's a bone-deep fanatic about his cause. Suppose his confession's some kind of a . . . ploy? Let's say Feicke and Helena are together last night, maybe with a few friends from the animal rights movement. And they hear on the radio that somebody used Randy Castle's home for target practice. They've been looking for a forum to publicize their cause, and this is it. Feicke confesses to the shooting, the trial draws national publicity for weeks, maybe months, and at the end, they announce that his confession was a hoax and they can prove it."

"But wouldn't Feicke be in trouble?"

"He might be charged with obstructing justice or something, sure. Maybe all of them would be. They'd be fined, maybe do a few nights in jail. But trust me, Feicke and Helena are serious enough about animal rights to serve some time for it."

"I don't know," Yvonne said doubtfully. "It seems hard to believe they'd go to such . . . extremes."

"Extreme's the operative word when it comes to animal rights. Both sides see it as a life and death struggle, for the animals or their own lifestyle. It's almost as volatile as the abortion issue, and people are killing each other over that one."

"Still, all this is speculation. We have no proof."

"Maybe not, but if Feicke didn't pop Castle and his manager, then whoever did it is still on the loose and the police aren't looking for him because they think they've got their man. I'd better call Stan Wolinski about this, even if I'm wrong."

"Fair enough, you call Stan, and I'll grill a couple of chicken breasts for dinner. A quiet evening at home tonight? No pups to deliver?"

"I'll do my best," he said, checking the directory for the number of the sheriff's department.

Ten minutes later he wandered into the kitchen, somberly sipping the last of his wine.

"What's wrong?"

"Wolinski says the idea of Feicke faking his confession isn't off the map. The preliminary ballistics report on the shooting came back and it's possible two weapons were involved. The slug that killed Benetto may be slightly different from the ones recovered from the house. They're the same caliber and they're deformed from the impact, so they can't be sure."

"What's Stan going to do?"

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"All he can do is continue to question Feicke and try to break down his story."

"You know, there may be another explanation for this. Suppose Feicke's taking the fall for someone else?"

"Like who?"

"Helena. She feels as strongly as Feicke does, and as I recall, she and her first husband were both expert shots. Competitive skeet shooting, not hunting. She didn't get active in the animal rights movement until after he died."

"Do you think she's capable of a thing like that?"

"I think a strong, intelligent woman is capable of anything she sets her mind to," Yvonne said wryly. "Even killing, to protect herself or someone she loved."

"She was pretty upset when she stormed out of the studio yesterday. On the other hand, there are two sides of this thing and we've only been considering one of them. Hunters are as adamant as the rights activists. And they're the ones who own guns."

"But Castle couldn't have shot himself."

"No, not in the left bicep with a rifle. It would be physically impossible. Still, all things considered, he's ahead of the game. His rival's dead, his wife is intimidated, his tour's back on track, and he'll get national media attention for months."

"I'd hardly call getting shot a lucky break."

"Maybe luck had nothing to do with it. Not if he had a guardian angel."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I understand it myself. The thing is, Stan told me he had a bad feeling about this, like a voice on the wind, warning him something was wrong. And I've been having the same feeling myself, only it's been . . . personal. I even dreamed about it last night."

"About what?"

"About my father's death. It's been on my mind all day."

"Your father? But . . . do you think it was some kind of a warning?"

"From beyond the grave, you mean? No, it wasn't like that. And anyway, my father and I didn't communicate that well when he was living, I can't imagine that he'd be a voice on the wind all these years later. No, it was more like a . . . reminder. To help me remember something important. It may be nothing, but I'd like to

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follow it through. I have to talk to someone. Save my supper, I won't be long."

"Where are you going?"

He hesitated in the doorway. "To visit an old friend," he said. "I hope."

The Jaeger place was a Centennial Farm, so designated by the state with a handsome bronze plaque mounted on a post in the front yard. A hundred years of being worked by the same family. Actually it was closer to a hundred and forty years, but it wouldn't matter much longer. Hutch Jaeger's only son had died in Viet Nam. There would be no Jaegers after him on this land.

It wasn't really a farm anymore, in any case. It had been eleven hundred acres once, but Hutch had ceded a thousand acres to the state in his late wife's name for a preserve for deer and elk and a small herd of American bison.

Only the house and outbuildings remained on the last hundred acres now. The house was a mammoth old three-story Victorian pile, painted a cheery Christmas red with white trim to match its barns and silos. A shaded front porch stretched the full width of the building, complete with swings, cafe tables, and chairs that overlooked the sprawling grounds. If you wanted to miniaturize a farm for children to play with, this would be the one.

David had been here many times to tend sick animals. Hutch still kept a small herd of dairy cattle. They were long since past their productive years but he maintained them anyway, like friends who'd retired. He'd also converted one of his barns to a kennel for greyhounds after reading about how the animals were mistreated or killed when their racing days were over. His farm was a halfway house for them now, a place where they could run free and frolic and enjoy a puppyhood they'd never known.

A half-dozen of the lean, lanky dogs surrounded David's Jeep as he pulled into the yard, yapping a greeting that brought Hutch to the front door.

"David? What's up? Has one of those damned hounds been playing with my cellular phone again?"

"Strictly a social call, Hutch. Have you got a few minutes?"

"Sure, let's sit on the porch here. House is a mess anyway. Join me in a beer?"

"I'd like one, thanks." David eased down at one of the cafe tables. Hutch disappeared into the house for a moment, then came

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back with two beers; he tossed one to David, but didn't join him at the table. He rested a haunch on the porch railing instead, a few yards away. He looked drained, and he was wearing a canvas trench coat though the evening wasn't at all chilly yet.

"So," he said, looking out over the yard, "what brings you all the way out here?"

"Just wanted to talk. The panel yesterday turned out to be a lot more exciting than I expected."

"That's a fact," Hutch acknowledged, sipping his beer. "That Feicke has to be totally out of his tree."

"And Castle's not?"

"There's a difference," Hutch said evenly. "Castle's on my side."

"Or you thought he was."

"Randy may not be an ideal NRA poster boy, but I think his interest in the hunting life's genuine. And he definitely knows how to attract media attention to the sport."

"And to himself as well," David noted.

"Well, who do reporters want to talk to? A rock singer or an old fuddy-duddy like me?"

"That depends on the kind of story they want. What do you suppose Feicke wants?"

"Publicity," Hutch said bitterly. "That's what they all want nowadays. Go on TV and say your mama slept with your brother, or you shoot a rock star. And reporters shove a microphone in your face and ask you how it felt. Everybody yells at everybody else, and in the noise the things that matter are drowned out. . . ." Hutch's voice faded, and his gaze seemed to lose focus in the terribly familiar way it had done on the show the day before. . . .

The same way David's father had faded in and out in the last days of his life. And there it was.

David rose casually and moved to the railing near Hutch.

"Hunting was our way of life for a hundred thousand years and more," Hutch continued softly, almost to himself. "Helena and her friends think the world's a giant zoo and we're the keepers. Well, maybe they're right. But there are a million deer in this state. Ban hunting for a year and there'll be two million. A year after that their numbers will double again and we'll have to slaughter them like vermin or they'll devour their habitat and destroy themselves and every creature they share it with. You know it's true."

"I know," David acknowledged. "But I also know you've kept your dairy cattle long past their useful years and you've gone to a

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lot of expense and trouble to bring these greyhounds up from Florida to make a home for them. Where's the logic in that?"

"I didn't say it was simple," Hutch said drily, gathering himself. "If savin' a few dogs makes me a hypocrite, I can live with it. There's room for both sides in this, if we can just find some kind of balance. But that isn't how it's been goin' the last few years. The anti-hunting mob's growing and the press is on their side because it's an easy story: Hunters are Neanderthals and every deer is Bambi."

"And Randy Castle said he could change the balance? By volunteering to be a martyr for the cause? Is that what happened?"

Hutch eyed him a moment, then nodded slowly. "Randy came to me with the idea after Feicke jumped him in the parking lot. He said he was willing to take a flesh wound for the cause if I could deliver one safely. Everybody'd assume Feicke or one of his loony friends did it and maybe we could sway public opinion our way for a change."

"It was a crazy idea."

"No," Hutch said levelly, "it was a very brave idea, I thought. And it would have worked. Only . . . it went wrong. He was supposed to be alone. I would never have fired into the house if I'd known anyone else was there."

"I don't think it was a mistake, Hutch," David said carefully. "I think it worked exactly the way Randy meant it to."

Hutch turned slowly to face him, as if he'd just remembered David was there at all. "What does that mean?"

"That Benetto's death wasn't an accident. A minute ago you said that Randy's plan was a brave thing to do. Maybe it wasn't so brave. For one thing, he was stoned when he arrived at the emergency room. I doubt he even felt the wound. But even if he did, it was probably worth it. His musical career was on the skids, his concert tour was losing money, and his wife was having an affair with his business manager. And then bang! You solved all of his problems with a few shots. He's a media hero, his tour's red-hot again, his rival's dead, and his wife is so terrified she wouldn't dream of leaving him."

"You're wrong. Except for the shot that grazed Randy's arm, I fired at random. There's no way he could have arranged for Benetto to get hit."

"You're underestimating him. Did he know what kind of weapon you were going to use?"

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"We discussed it, sure. We needed one that'd be accurate and seem lethal without doing too much damage. The .223 fit the bill. The military full-metal jacket ammo would make it look like the shots came from an assault weapon, but the main point was that they wouldn't expand so his wound would be as clean as possible."

"So the ammunition was his choice?"

"That's right. I didn't have any jacketed ammo so Randy gave me a box."

"But not a full box?"

"There may have been a couple of rounds missing. . . . My God."

"Right. He killed Benetto himself, using ammo from the same box you fired at the house. A perfect match. A perfect crime. You've got to tell Stan Wolinski what happened, Hutch."

Hutch fell silent, mulling it over. "No," he said at last. "I don't think I can do that."

"Hutch, you have to. If you don't, Castle's going to get away with murder."

"He might anyway. That crazy Feicke's already confessed to it, and even if I come forward now, I won't make much of a witness. You remember when I had that . . . lapse yesterday, in the TV studio? It wasn't the first. I have them fairly often now, and they're getting worse. It's Alzheimer's, David."

"I know," David said, nodding. "I sensed something was wrong yesterday. I even dreamt about it last night. My father had Alzheimer's, too."

"Then you understand my situation. I can't go in with you to answer a lot of questions. I'll just get confused and make a muck of it. Hell, I was probably having a lapse when I let Castle talk me into this in the first place. So, I'll give you the gun I used, David. You give it to the sheriff. The bullets fired from it and the one that killed Benetto will be different. But I'm not going in with you. If Stan wants to talk to me, I'll be here."

David hesitated.

"I give you my word."

"All right, Hutch." David nodded. "Your word's always been good enough for me."

Dusk was settling over the hills as David drove slowly down the farm lane out to the highway, lost in thought. It was going to be a mess, any way you looked at it. Feicke and Castle and the law tearing at each other with Hutch caught in the middle. They'd rip

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into the old man like—David hit the brakes on instinct, startled by a sound. A faint, too familiar, pop.

He sat there, engine idling, hoping he'd hear the sound again, hoping it was a backfire, a blowout. Anything. Hoping he was wrong.

But he wasn't. An eerie wailing gradually arose, from the dogs kenneled near the house at first, then spreading to the others, each of them lifting their voices in a timeless lament.

They were greyhounds, not hunting dogs. They had no way of knowing what that muffled shot meant. And yet they did know, all of them. As though a voice on the wind had whispered it to them. And so they howled, howled as though it was the end of the world. Howled, as though they'd lost their best friend.

Perhaps they had.

"I should never have left him alone," David said. "I should have known."

"That diploma back at your office says you're a veterinarian, Doc," Stan Wolinski said. "It doesn't say anything about bein' a mind reader." They were in Stan's prowl car, following the ambulance slowly back to Algoma. There was no hurry.

"No, it was in his voice, his whole attitude," David said. "If you'd talked to him, you would have guessed."

"All I know about suicides is that if they're really determined, and Hutch was, then there's not much anybody can do about it. Except make themselves crazy broodin' about how they might've done this or that differently. The bottom line is, you couldn't have prevented it. And you damn sure can't change it now."

David eyed him a moment. "No. I guess not."

"What matters now is that it counts for something. Hutch left a note explaining what happened, how Castle came to him with the idea of making himself into a martyr, and how they worked it. At the end, what Hutch feared most was that by the time Castle came to trial, his condition would have deteriorated so much that he'd embarrass himself. And let Castle get away with murder because of it."

"It still won't be easy to convict him, will it? I mean, he's still the guy with the hole in his arm and Feicke's confessed to the shooting."

"When Feicke hears what's happened, I doubt he'll stick to his story for long. And if Castle's wife was as frightened as you said,

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maybe I can talk her around once he's in jail. A big part of it will depend on you, though."

"On me? Why?"

"You're the last person Hutch talked to," Stan said carefully. "You're the only one who can testify that he was calm and rational. And how sorry he was about what he and Castle tried to do. Will you have any problem with that?"

"No," David said. "That's how it was."

"Good," Stan said grimly. "In that case, we'll be able to put Mr. Castle where he belongs for a long while."

"This is personal with you, isn't it?"

"Damn straight it is. Hutch Jaeger was a friend of mine. The way I see it, Castle's as responsible for his death as if he'd shot him himself. I want him to pay for it. One way or another."

Neither of them spoke for a while, riding in silence, each adrift in his own thoughts.

"Somethin' I wanted to ask you about," Stan said at last. "Somethin' in your line, for a change."

"What is it?"

"That sound those hounds were makin' when the medics carried Hutch's body out? I've heard dogs howl before, plenty of times. But I've never heard anything quite like that. Is there a special name for it?"

"Animal rites," David said.

"Animal . . . ? You're putting me on, right? Is that really what it's called?"

"No," David said. "But it should be."●

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BY JEFFERY DEAVER

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Artist's Proof
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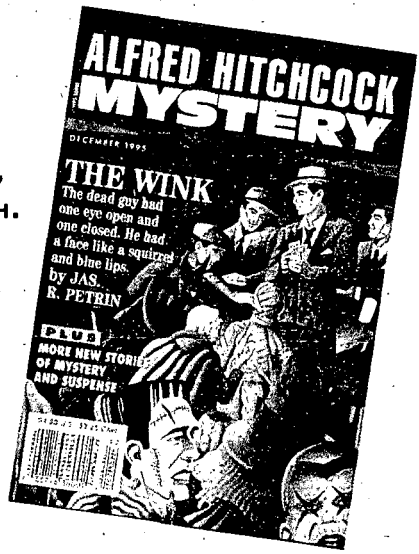
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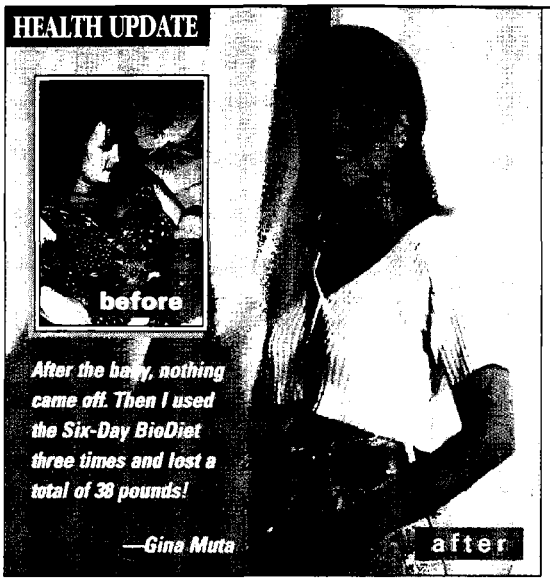
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